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# QUEER LADY JUDAS

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# Queer Lady Judas

BY

“ R I T A ”

*Author of "Peg the Rake," "The Sinner," "Souls,"*  
*"The Jesters," "The Silent Woman,"*  
*"The Masqueraders,"*  
*&c., &c.*



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## Preface

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*This is a book*

OF WOMEN,

FOR WOMEN,

BY A WOMAN

*They may hate it for its truth, but each and all in their "looking glass" hours will acknowledge that it is true. For his own sake and for sake of some cherished illusions, no "mere man" should be bold enough to read it.*

AUTHOR.

1905.



## QUEER LADY JUDAS

### I

---

THE grey November sky brooded in lethargic gloom above uplifted roofs and spires. A momentary glow faded into a single line of red. Below gleamed the oily sheen of the river, and the huge ugliness of warehouses facing the stony stolidity of the Embankment. For a brief space the rose of day lay on the breast of night; then suddenly—as if a hand had snatched it—it had gone.

The great city was wrapped in darkness. All its phantasmagoria of good and evil, poverty and wealth, crime and wickedness, lay under a pall of fog. Fog that had been lying in wait above those brooding roofs. Fog that, like a dark and monstrous demon, swooped with outstretched wings over desired prey. Futile lamps glowed feebly as in protest. Faint flashes of electric light pierced the enveloping darkness. Little sparks of flame shot across the murky tide; the curving arm of the Embankment became a mystery.

Behind me, as I stood and watched it all, rose the twin Houses of those laws men make—to break. Their Gothic beauty stood out clear and noble; the many windows gleamed like jewels through the threatening dusk. Cabs rattled in and out of the vast courtyard. Life was active and energetic around the square that faced the route to Whitehall; the spire of the Abbey lifted itself heavenwards, as if in harmony with all it signified. But the cloud curtain was

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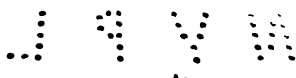
approaching more nearly, and I accepted its warning as a stranger might. For I felt a stranger in my own land to-night. I was following the track of years that seemed endless—and had set a wide gulf of unfamiliarity between me and the scene on which my eyes lingered. Yet the space of time was not actually long, counted as time. Only long by reason of experiences it had brought. Experiences at which I looked back now as one looks at events framing a separate life and separate interests.

Although I claimed personal knowledge of both, I found myself criticising them in an odd impersonal fashion. The fashion of the girl I *had* been, who questioned the woman I had become.

That woman stood alone and friendless in this great wilderness of humanity. The vigorous life of youth still fought against youth's dreaded foe—unhappiness. Darkness and light alternated in a struggle that had meant despair; and because of youth, and because of something demanding existence, even though suffering for it, the woman had gathered up the broken fragments of courage and hope—and stood face to face with a new effort.

A fatalist—and a fog. Could anything be more commonplace! I could have laughed in bitterness of soul, if one ever laughs in loneliness, which I doubt. As it was I suddenly awoke to the recognition of my own personality, and to the absurdity of standing on this bridge of embodied melancholy, watching the approach of a threatening shadow.

People trooped past me. Shivering beggars whined pitiful petitions, and I gave them odd sixpences or coppers, and won frantic blessings as return. Suffering either appeals to suffering, or to personal selfishness. My charity was not born of pity. I too was alone, and friendless. Such facts appealed to my consciousness as the conviction of other miserable souls in miserable conditions had no power *to do*.



Chilled and shivering I turned away, and slowly retraced my steps from the centre of the bridge to its abutment on the main thoroughfare. The noise of the traffic, the stir and bustle and confusion of hurrying crowds, all helped to emphasize the unimportance of individual existence in the peopled vastness around. I crossed over to Victoria Street with sudden haste. An anxiety to get away from this callous, crowded region. My own tiny flat, high up in one of those great mansions, suddenly gave a hint of comfort. The thought of Barbe Piccotée, the honest old French servant, who had shared my vicissitudes, even to the extent of accompanying me to this "so cold and dreadful Angleterre," was a reprimand to ingratitude born of forgetfulness. She was faithful friend and servitor both. I was not quite alone—quite unloved. With quickened steps I hurried on.

The mist had suddenly thickened, and the street loomed dusky and indistinct before my eyes. Then, without warning—sudden as the dropping of a stage curtain—a black wall of fog stood barrier to my progress. I halted. A sense of fear struck to my heart, for I was nervous and in bad health. I had forgotten, also, the strange ways of London fogs. I knew the turning to my own domicile lay to the left of Victoria Street itself. But I was on the right hand side, and had to cross the road. That undertaking looked too perilous to be accomplished safely. The number of omnibuses and cabs was emphasized by the drivers' shouts. A lamp post with flickering light served but to intensify the darkness around. I stood under that welcome gleam shivering and uncertain; shadowy forms and figures passed or repassed like grotesque shapes from some modern Inferno. Cries of alarm or warning alternated with the hoarse cries of cabmen, the oaths of 'bus drivers, the warnings of policemen. With a sudden sense of helplessness I snatched at the coat-sleeve of a passing guardian of the peace, as I thought.



"Oh! would you mind taking me across the road?" I entreated.

The arm I clutched steadied itself under my grasp. I was conscious that the figure beside me drew itself up, but that it was not the commanding figure I had imagined.

"Pardon, madame! It is that you wish to cross the street? But, certainly, I shall have much pleasure to aid you. How it is dark—this *brouillard*! Ah! but what a climate *affreux* you have in this England! *Tenez* madame—have a care! It is better that one makes slow. See, the light shows just one little instant. *Pas si vite*, madame, *pas si vite*. There! Make steady now; we are arrived!"

I thanked him in his own tongue. He hailed me compatriot with enthusiasm, but I denied the flattery.

"I have been many years in your country; Paris was my home; but I am not French," I said.

He was polite enough to say he would never have guessed the fact but for madame's frank acknowledgment. He asked if he could be of any further assistance, and I gladly availed myself of his aid to the next turning, which I knew meant my street. Even then the trouble was not over. It was too dark to distinguish the numbers of the mansions, and we groped into several entrances before I discovered my own. Then I thanked him gratefully—even asking if he would not come up to the flat and await the possible lifting of this so "abominable *brouillard*."

He declined the offer with simple courtesy. "I am but the owner of one insignificant little *pharmacie* in the next street—the *Pharmacie* Thibaud. Madame may perhaps have observed it."

"I have only just come here," I said.

"It is my name," he went on, "André Thibaud, at the service of madame, who owns but one small *petite pharmacie* with a lamp of red above the door. Madame will have the goodness to remember?"

I said I would—and he then left with many bows and expressions of delight at our *rencontre*. I knew him for a small, thin, elderly man, with a pinched, sallow face, and dreamy eyes, that seemed full of thought and speculation. At that special moment he conveyed no hint of destiny, nor lingered in my memory longer than my passage in the lift. But later on when a bright fire cheered, and old Barbe's exquisite cookery had comforted me, I sat sipping my coffee and speculating on the advent of Monsieur Thibaud, until it set itself as a background to a scheme I had come hither to work out.

My fortunes were at an extremely low ebb. Justified by comparisons with what they *had* been, I felt myself pauperized. A year was all I could hope for as a probationary period between expenditure of my present capital and success of an intended experiment. I might earn a livelihood or I might fail miserably. The advice of the only friend I could trust had helped me to learn the methods of my profession practically and theoretically. That advice had sent me away from Paris, proclaiming London the better place to start my business. I was furnished with a few introductions which, as yet, had brought me neither client nor caller. A few modest advertisements of "*Certificated masseuse from Paris*," had also appealed unavailingly to the curious—or the beauty-seekers.

I glanced around my modest flat. It was small but it was artistic. The inner room, reserved for expected clients, opened out of my tiny *salle à manger* and *salon* combined. The draped toilet table, the rose and leaf-green hangings and chair covers, the quaint *console* with its numerous pots and bottles and paraphernalia, all looked inviting and comfortable. I had no doubt of their attractions. I only wanted to get those attractions known and talked about.

My *rencontre* with the little Frenchman reminded me of *possible assistance*. Among my possessions were

certain valuable old recipes for face washes and skin beautifying. They were difficult to make up owing to certain rare ingredients requisite for their composition. Even in Paris I had not succeeded in procuring the exact ingredients, and been obliged to put up with latter-day substitutes. The difficulty of finding a London chemist near at hand and skilful had troubled me greatly, when I reflected how small was my stock-in-trade. Monsieur Thibaud loomed suddenly on my horizon of perplexity. No doubt he could prepare these things. I would give him a speedy call. Perhaps to-morrow.

Oh! those to-morrows for which one lived. Always hoping something would happen. That the dull monotony would be broken. That life would once again become active, exciting, even interesting. As yet it was sluggish as the river beyond; the river at which I had gazed more than once, wondering if indeed with finality came—Peace.

Barbe Piccotée entered with my letters, and a gentle reprimand for the persistent melancholy which of late had been my unenviable companion.

“Regard then, madame! Here are two—three—even four letters of the post; and one—it has the coronet of rank as of old times. Behold it!”

I took them from the salver she presented. The uppermost letter certainly awakened interest. I had imagined the days of distinguished correspondence were gone never to return. This coronet was stamped in imposing colours on violent hued paper. Eagerly I opened the envelope. The address was Eaton Square, S.W.

“Lady Judith Vanderbyl, having seen Madame Beaufort’s advertisement in the *Morning Post* of 12th inst., will call upon her on Wednesday morning next, 10.30, for advice.”

I was conscious of surprise as well as satisfaction. It *was the first* notice my advertisement had received.

Surprise rose from the fact that the titled client proposed coming to me instead of commanding my attendance at her own residence. However, I was not inclined to cavil at any proposal, however peculiar. In the career before me public recognition meant success. It might be forced by sudden good luck, it might be of slow growth and uncertainty. But it must have a beginning. Here at last was that beginning.

I glanced round my insignificant rooms. Barbe Piccotée, lingering on self-made pretences, chirped interrogation.

"Is it then that at last someone comes to madame? But yes! I felt sure when the *facteur* has given to me that letter of the colour extraordinary and the *couronne petite*. 'But there,' I say to myself, 'madame jumps to the fame of success at last.'"

"You jump too quickly to results, my good Barbe," I said. "Still, as everything must have a beginning, I am not sorry that one promises itself. I was growing hopeless."

"To-morrow—is it then?" she asked.

I nodded. "At half-past ten. Be ready in good time, and have the rooms well arranged."

"As if madame needs to command such instructions. In this little *appartement*, so convenable, the work is but a bagatelle! But why does madame not continue her correspondence? There are letters more than one that claim the attention."

"So there are," I said. "But it is hardly likely that——" I paused abruptly. Then I laughed. "But what is it then that arrives!" I exclaimed. "Another lady desires also to avail herself of my services! Another lady makes the appointment! Why, Barbe Piccotée, the good chances seem to have fallen all together! At one time! The affair marches at last."

"Madame is pleased! Madame regains once more the good spirits! But it is well that she makes not life the affair serious any longer. That she laughs——"

I did laugh as I sprang from my chair and looked at the two letters. Then I opened the others. One was a circular respecting patented quackeries. The other—the other certainly puzzled me. I read it while Barbe Piccotée was preparing the cup of chocolate I usually took at night. She studied my comforts and sympathised with my troubles, and entered into all my interests as no English domestic ever seems to enter into the inner life of her mistress. My descent from riches to poverty, and the obligation of earning a livelihood were only misfortunes, not drawbacks to my service, in these faithful old eyes. When she returned with the chocolate I was putting the letters away in my bureau. I turned to her—

“Figure to yourself, then, my faithful one; that letter—the other—was also eventful. It concerns money.”

“But yes, madame! What of it?”

Again I laughed gaily.

“A great and wonderful and influential firm, they have written to offer me loans. Loans of money to establish myself. What think you, Barbe? Is not this English nation kind and thoughtful to the stranger? Loans of any sum I desire. Without risk—without security, save my own promise. Is it then a veritable city of philanthropy, this London; so ugly—so dark—so drear, and so rich?”

“Madame she makes the *plaisanterie*. She would not assuredly borrow money from any of these so grasping extortionists! I who speak—I know. They are of all places, of all cities, of all countries. Ah! madame, let me entreat—”

“Barbe Piccotée,” I said, sternly. “I am not quite a fool. It is true I have but little money. Yet I *have* it. I am not going to gamble with it, or be deluded by all the financiers and Jews in the world! See—this is how I reply to letters such as this!”

I took the broad, thick sheet and tore it across. I was about to toss the pieces into the grate. But a sudden impulse seemed to stay my hand.

"No—I'll keep it," I said. "Perhaps some day when I write my experiences, it may prove a text for——"

For what it is. For what it reads in its own plain, bald words.

"DEAR MADAM,

"We note by your advertisement in *Morning Post* of 12th inst. that you have just established yourself as a *masseuse* and beauty specialist from Paris. Should you be in need of any pecuniary assistance in the way of a loan or advance, our firm would be happy to attend your instructions. Ladies in your position are often handicapped by want of capital, and thus allow a promising business to suffer or fail. We are prepared to finance you in an enterprising manner. Also we advance large or small sums (in case of temporary difficulties) on your note of hand at reasonable interest. You may rely on our secrecy and discretion should you feel inclined to favour us with instructions.

"Awaiting the favour of a reply,

We beg to remain,

Your's faithfully,

ABRAHAM, NEUGASSE, KRAPMANN & Co.,

Old Jewry, E.C."

"Long may you have to wait!" I said to myself. "Still—one never knows!"

And I threw the two halves of the torn sheet into a drawer of the bureau, and turned the key.

## II

I WOKE early with a consciousness of something to face—something to be performed. The knowledge that this day at least would not be like so many grey, purposeless days that had preceded it. While I arranged my little *salle-de-toilette*, I wondered what my first client would be like, Young or middle-aged? Pretty or *passé*? Would she do me credit or not? I criticised my own appearance with unusual severity. It seemed to me there would be little use in a woman setting up as a beauty specialist unless she was personally a presentable advertisement of her profession. I had no cause to complain—as yet. Nature had given me a clear skin, good hair, and good features. No lines or wrinkles had as yet marked my years emphatically. Tears and grief had only shadowed my eyes, not stamped those cruel circles which no art or artifice can efface.

Frenchwomen are skilled in most secrets of the toilet. I possessed many. In especial a cream to be massaged into the skin, whose recipe I would not have parted with for a hundred pounds—sorely as I needed money.

At last the expected ring announced the expected client. The door of my little *salon* was opened by Barbe Piccotée, and the Lady Judith Vanderbyl was ushered in with due ceremony.

When I looked at women I had a habit of picturing them to myself, not as they presented themselves, with the adjuncts of dress—of coiffure—“*en grande toilette*,” but as I imagined them in their natural, unartificial condition. *The genuine woman*, as Nature had seen fit to create her.

When my eyes fell on this special person I was conscious of a momentary shock. I had never seen anyone quite so ugly, nor yet quite so interesting.

There was something about her that spoke tragedy or—suffering. Mental and physical, it seemed to me.

She was short and stout, and beautifully dressed. But her figure was one that no modiste's art could improve. Her face was sallow; lined and wrinkled to an extent that defied concealment. She was atrociously rouged and powdered; her dark, piercing eyes were disfigured by *kohl*, and her eyebrows so blackened that they emphasized all the faults of her face, and the disfigurement of her "make up."

My first rapid glance had taken in all this before her harsh, abrupt voice sounded its first note of interrogation.

"You are Madame Beaufilet, I suppose?"

"Yes, madam."

"Not really French—are you? All you beauty-people call yourselves 'Madame.' I suppose you think it sounds better?"

I gave the explanation already offered to Monsieur Thibaud.

"Have you a new method? I hope you're not another of the professional impostors who trade on vanity and self-delusion."

I felt myself colour hotly. "I profess nothing that I am not qualified to perform. I treat faulty and discoloured skins by massage and certain specifics dating back to the time of de l'Enclos. I don't profess to give a new skin or a new complexion, or eradicate lines and marks stamped by the hand of time, by faulty modes of life, or faulty treatment."

"At least you are honest, that's something. I have been to people who have professed to beautify and re-juvenate me—even me. I leave you to judge what they have done! I should be sorry to confess what they have cost! They



## Queer Lady Judas

are all frauds! I know it—and yet I try each new specialist, in the hopes of finding one that is not.”

“Madam is of course aware that we cannot perform miracles?”

“I don’t expect a miracle. I merely want to know can you make me passable—presentable—less hideous? Terms are no object. I *have* to employ art; but my present maid, who was recommended by a Bond Street specialist, would make a better house-painter than a complexion assistant. Look at me!” She threw up her white veil; she stood in the full light of the window and challenged its merciless betrayal and my compassionate scrutiny.

I scarcely knew what to say. I always had felt sorry for women who were obliged to resort to artifice—women whom Nature had cursed with ugliness; but I confessed to myself that I had never seen any woman quite so hopelessly ugly as was this Lady Judith Vanderbyl.

“You need not speak!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Your face is expressive. You haven’t taught it to lie very skilfully. I am going to put myself into your hands. I want to see exactly what you do. If you please me I can send you dozens, scores of women who will be a better advertisement for your methods than I myself. Come—begin.”

She looked around and saw the little room beyond, and walked in at once. I followed silently. She was certainly very odd—very queer, very unlike what I had imagined. And besides all this she promised to be anything but a creditable specimen of my art.

I watched her as she removed her hat. She wore an elaborate russet-coloured “transformation,” quite unsuited to her dark skin and piercing black eyes. The costly sables and lace about her shoulders only threw up in stronger relief her too redundant bust and short, thick waist.

Seated in the chair, she looked at her own reflection in my charming old French mirror, with a grim and merciless *scrutiny that astonished me.*

"It will tax your ingenuity Madame Beaudelet, to do anything with *that*." She nodded ironically at her own reflection. "You may experiment freely. If you can make me only decently presentable I will employ you regularly."

I was busying myself with the Russian vaporiser I used for steaming. I made no answer.

"Have you had much experience?" she asked again.

"Not private cases. I studied in a private hospital in Paris. The head physician, Dr. Jules Gautier, was a friend of mine. I have learnt all about the skin and its treatment, its hygiene, muscles, texture. How it can be preserved and improved. Dr. Gautier taught me facial massage. It was he who urged me to set up as a specialist. I had lost a large fortune——"

"Umph!" she interrupted. "They mostly have. Are you a widow?"

I felt inclined to say my private affairs were not her business. But I restrained myself.

"Yes, madam," I answered.

"Beaudelet—is, of course, assumed?"

"I was married to the Comte de Marsac when I was only seventeen years of age. I claim French descent on my mother's side. I adopted her name for professional purposes."

"You speak English like an Englishwoman."

"My father taught me. He used to bring me to England with him when he came over on business."

"I see! I suppose you think I am very curious, or very impertinent?"

"I think that private affairs are not necessarily connected with one's professional capacity."

She gave an odd, harsh laugh. "You are right. They're not. I ask your pardon. Please get to work."

The vaporiser being now ready I proceeded to steam her face. She sat back with closed eyes, and seemed to

enjoy the soothing process and the delightful fragrance it distilled.

But for me the process was attended by additional disillusion. The pores of her skin were clogged with paint and powder and dirt. It took half-an-hour to get her face *clean*, and then its yellowness, its many lines, and wrinkles and haggard outlines seemed to set even art at defiance. However, I am not easily discouraged. I spent a good ten minutes in washing the exposed surface with some of my tonic-water, thus bracing the relaxed pores and muscles, and preparing them for the next process—that of massage with the special cream, whose preparation was known only to myself and the chemist who had prepared it.

This massage seemed to delight my strange client. Her face lost its harsh, ironic expression. The cruel lines about the mouth relaxed. The heavy lids sank drowsily over the keen bright eyes. Placid and passive her face lay beneath my hands, and when it came to “making it up” I took care that it should present something different from the daubed mask I had first beheld. All my preparations were of the purest and best. I had no fear of disastrous results from their use. I watched the delicate colour glow and blend with the skin—suits its dusky tints as the dry harsh carmine had never suited it. Then I drew the irregular brows into a skilful arch, and left the eyelids severely alone. Finally, I dusted the whole face over with a faint yellow powder, then withdrew the wrapper, and asked her to look at herself. Astonishment, then pleasure, flashed into her eyes.

“Why, you are a magician! I never looked like this before. What have you done?”

I explained, and gave her a few simple directions, advising her on no account to permit her maid to use dry rouge or liquid powder. She vowed she would throw all her other stuffs into the fire, and use only my prescriptions.

Her order was lavish in the extreme. I felt both *gratified and astonished*. “I shall come to you three times

a week," she concluded. "In a fortnight I shall be able to decide if you're worth sticking to, and if I find you are—well, I'll stand your friend, and send you so many customers that you'll have to move into fashionable quarters, and have a staff of assistants and all the rest of it! Not but what you're better as you are; more genuine. Success spoils everyone, especially women!"

She began to put on her gloves. Her restless eyes turned from point to point of my tiny rooms.

"Excellent style and taste. French taste I see; and your name is to be—Beaudelet. Very well. I am discreet. I shall not upset your confidence. I have had my own share of trouble. Perhaps you, too. . . . Well, no matter. It is the woman's fate. Ah! what I could tell you of life. Of the men and women who make it! Especially the women. They all hate me. Perhaps not so much as I hate them. The dear, treacherous cats! I'm candid, am I not? It's the virtue of age and unpopularity. Not that I'm unpopular. Dear me, no! I'm the most popular woman in London—and the most detested! One implies the other in present-day society. It's not the people who are liked but the people who are feared who go everywhere, and get the best of everything."

She took up her huge sable muff as if to depart at last. The sharp "ting" of the bell sounded.

"Is that another customer?" she asked sharply. "No one who knows me, I hope!"

"Lady Ormaroyd," announced Barbe Piccotée.

A slight, well-dressed woman rustled in, and peered in a short-sighted fashion about her. She caught sight of Lady Judith, and stopped short in the middle of the room.

"You! Good gracious! You never give one a chance of being first in the field."

She laughed and held out her hand, then glanced at me.

"Are you Madame Beaudelet? Ah! yes. I thought so. You had my letter? And so Lady Judith has discovered

you also. She has the monopoly of surprises. Would it be indiscreet to ask——"

She hesitated; Lady Judith smiled.

"Oh yes. I have had a treatment. What do you think of the result?"

"It's perfectly wonderful! I never saw you look better——"

"Less hideous you mean. My dear Tessie, do you imagine I don't know perfectly well what you all say of me behind my back. So you are going to try our new beautifier also? You won't regret it. She has a marvellous method. She is also honest. That should go far in the present day when rogues and quacks hold a monopoly of our minds and bodies. I hardly think Madame Beaudelet will escape the taint of professionalism. But—we shall see. *Au revoir*, madame. Tessie, I'll see you later, I suppose?"

"I'm lunching with Lady Ripley," said her friend, rather eagerly.

An odd look flashed into the stormy black eyes. "Are you? Ask her, then, when she intends paying her dress-makers? I hear there is a total of thousands, and rumours of exhausted patience."

The door closed on her, and my new client turned to me with a semi-apologetic smile.

"Lady Judith is a great friend of mine," she observed. "It seemed so very odd meeting her here in this unexpected fashion. Are you ready for me? You had my letter?"

"Yes," I said. "Will you come into the next room?"

She followed me and glanced quickly around. She was a middle-aged woman, with a restless manner, a somewhat worn face, and tired eyes that were constantly blinking. Her mouth wore a perpetual smile, as if it endeavoured to contradict the fatigue of the eyes.

She threw aside her furs and toque with a sigh of relief, *and seated herself in the chair.*

"Take away that mirror," she said. "I don't want to see the process, only to feel it. Massage is the only thing that soothes these wretched nerves of mine. I have tried several of your profession, Madame Beaudelet. But none have been *quite* satisfactory, and their charges are ruinous. And I am a mere pauper. All Society folk are paupers now-a-days. Living is so expensive, and Bridge takes all one's ready money. Face massage is one of my luxuries, and when I saw your advertisement, I said, "Ah! *now* there's a chance of reasonable treatment. I'll try *one*, and, if satisfactory, will take the course of a dozen. Have you many customers yet? No. Ah! well it's early days. Let me tell you, however, you could not have a better friend than Lady Judith Vanderbyl. If she takes you up your fortune's made. She is a power in the social world. She is an Earl's daughter, who married an enormously wealthy man. No one knows exactly *what* he was. But of his wealth there was no doubt. He was supposed to lend money to governments, and finance companies, and things of that sort. As for Lady Judith—— But how I am chattering. Does it interfere?"

"Not at all."

"Well, as I was saying, Lady Judith is a most eccentric woman. She is feared and detested, but that does not interfere with her popularity. In fact, it is its secret. Sounds rather queer, doesn't it. But not so queer as herself. She goes by the nickname of the "Queer Lady Judas." Everyone has a nickname now-a-days. It's about the only distinction we can boast of. Are you sure I am not talking too much? Not interfering with the muscles——very well. Oh! I must say you did wonders for Lady Ju. Usually she looks atrocious. I often think her maid makes her an object just out of revenge. However, if she takes an interest in you—but I said that before. I see you believe in the steaming process? The last *masseuse* I went to told me it was most injurious; relaxed the pores of the skin."

"It is not injurious, used occasionally," I said. "But before I can treat your skin I must clean it."

"*Clean it!*" She started up. "My dear woman, I have a warm bath every day of my life, and I use tepid milk for my face."

"That is the reason your skin is so sticky. You overlay it with rouge and powder before it is dry. The result is——"

"Oh! please don't *say!* I'll take your word for it. We all make up nowadays—it's a necessity. How soothing your process is—I could go to sleep. I think your hands must be mesmeric."

I laughed. It was not the first time I had heard that, and it was one of the reasons that had induced Dr. Jules Gautier to advise my adopting the business of a professional *masseuse*.

### III

WHETHER she really slept or dozed mattered nothing to me. I went on with my process, and saw revealed the haggard, pallid face of a woman long past youth or its pretensions. The features were good, but all charm of outline, freshness, colouring had long vanished.

A saddening, disillusioning profession, this of mine. Not only was it the frank, almost brutal, exponent of woman's vanity, and all that such vanity means, but it showed the woman herself as a mere credulous fool in the hands of unscrupulous artificers.

I made no pretensions myself of being a miracle-worker. I merely stated and *proved* the beneficial results of certain methods and certain cosmetics. Given a good skin—and rational treatment of it—and a rational mode of life, there is no reason why a woman should look old or haggard even at three-score. But to rush wildly into excesses that are an offence to Nature, an outrage on common sense, is to throw down the gauntlet to all enemies of beauty; in itself but a short-lived thing, and rarely a blessing in disguise to its possessor.

The history of all noted beauties is merely a history of sins and shames, of riotous extravagance and inordinate vanity; of ignoble passions, insensate jealousy, and the hate and malice of rivals. The inevitable Dead Sea fruit moral is its epilogue. Yet women covet it above all earthly prizes.

Tell an ugly woman she is beautiful and you make her your slave. Tell a beautiful woman she has defects or blemishes, and she will hate you cordially all the rest of her life. Few women—if any—are ever weary of



hearing of their own perfections, their own charms. Even the new and rational sisterhood, who have agreed to fling femininity to the four winds of Heaven, are open to flattery on that very account. They love to be praised for muscular strength and prowess, for courage and daring, for success in sporting competitions, or for academical victories—just as their weaker-minded sisters love to hear that their eyes are exquisite, their forms divine, and they themselves surely created for men's adoration and happiness—or misery. They are as ready to grant the one as the other, and equally indifferent as to their reasons for doing so.

Thoughts like these were floating through my brain as my fingers worked mechanically at their business. Lady Ormaroyd was quite silent; I really thought she was asleep. When the beautifying process began, however, she opened her drowsy lids and asked for the mirror. When that operation was completed she laughed delightedly.

"Why, I declare I'd pass for thirty!" she exclaimed. "It's wonderful! For goodness sake send me all those things you use. Why, my colour is as natural as the real thing!"

Indeed it was, and I felt rather proud of my success. For, though artifice is not art, there may easily be an element of the artistic concerned in it. I had not studied the tricks of Parisian beauties without benefit; and if a woman must "make herself up" she need not be a glaring advertisement of the fact.

"And I feel so fresh—so rested," continued Lady Ormaroyd. "Really, my dear Madame Beaudelet, I ought to sound your praises wherever I go. Though that would prove me a model of unselfishness, for, if there's one thing a woman is afraid to tell another woman, it is who makes her up, and what she uses. It's nearly as bad as confessing who's her dressmaker. We are strange creatures; wise as serpents and harmful as—rooks! However, I really think *you* are a benefactress to your sex. Tell me, will this *last*?

I have to lunch at the house of one of the most beautiful women in London, and—*entre nous*—one of the wickedest. Not that one cares twopence about that now-a-days. But, naturally, I should like to draw down as little comparison as possible."

"Oh! it will last all day," I said. "But if you are going out in the evening you will require to touch up again. Shall I give you some of the necessaries?"

"Do! My carriage is waiting, and I'll take them with me. I don't trust my maid too much; they sell one's toilet secrets as brazenly as one's personal confidences. This is a sad world, Madame Beaudelet; one can't trust anybody. When shall I come to you again? Oh! I have not paid you. Here!—No!—I'll take a course of six, and write you a cheque."

I conducted her to my writing bureau in the next room, and gave her requisite materials. She still talked on:

"I know what I'll do. I'll tell Mrs. Dickey Johnson about you; she'll be a lovely advertisement. She is one of the smartest women in London—and such a skin! But she's very careful—she is afraid of spoiling it ever since Dolly St. Leger had her face nearly skinned by using that Hubert woman's stuff! Arsenic, I think it was—or mercury! However, it ruined poor Dolly's appearance, and she's never recovered. I wonder if you could do anything for her? You've only just set up, haven't you? Yes. And want customers I expect. Well, out of gratitude, I'll do my best for you. I know heaps of women who'd have massage every day if they could get it reasonably. Here is your cheque. And I'll come the day after to-morrow. Now good-bye! I shan't forget you, and I promise to tell Mrs. Dickey all about your wonderful methods; so truly original."

She was still chattering as the door closed.

I put aside her card and her cheque, and gave myself up to a congratulatory interlude ere Barbe Piccotée entered with my modest *déjeuner*. I kept to French habits still.

"A good beginning," I said to myself, between fragments of savoury omelette. "Two customers—both rich—both social powers. If only they are true to their promise I shall soon get on. Everything must have a beginning. Which reminds me now that I must look up my little French chemist, for I shall soon need to supplement my stock."

The afternoon was bright and warm. The memory of yesterday's fog seemed an insult to the present clear atmosphere and sunny sky. I found the little *pharmacie* without difficulty, and found Monsieur Thibaud also, behind the counter, engaged in preparing some evil-smelling mixture.

He did not recognise me until I spoke. I made known my errand, and he listened with grave attention.

"It is a responsibility," he said. "Will madame walk into my *petit salon* there behind my shop, and let me see these so famous recipes she possesses. I will make myself aware of their contents before I agree to the suggestion of madame."

I walked into the *petit salon*. A very dingy, poverty-stricken place it was. A place of musty volumes and shelves of bottles, containing queer specimens of the animal and vegetable world. Monsieur Thibaud apologised for its disorder.

"But I am at present alone to myself. I have no one to consider how I shall present myself, or my poor chamber. Now if madame will show me——"

I took out the old faded slips of paper and laid them on the table. He bent his white head and spectacled eyes over them in an absorbed silence that lasted for several moments.

Then he looked at me. "But these are, indeed, valuable! If madame's profession is that of the *art de beauté* she will make herself *tout à fait fameuse*! No one of the profession *could possess the cosmétiques* more altogether of benefit. For

a good skin they are of a service inestimable. For one that is not of so favourable conditions they are also excellent. Healing—*invigoratiffe*, as one says here."

"Could you prepare them exactly?" I asked. "I may want a constant supply, and you see they must be fresh. It will mean some trouble——"

"Trouble, madame! that is nothing. Nothing at all, if one loves what is one's work! Of a certainty I could prepare them. It would be to me a pleasure to assist madame, and, who knows, it may be of advantage; advantage, so to say, *à l'un et l'autre*. For is it not strange, I say to myself but the night of yesterday, 'I shall see madame again. It was not for nothing that we should meet in that so dark and abominable *brouillard*.' And so it has been; *à la bonne chance*, madame! I will serve you faithfully and well. You shall not have to suffer the decoction for the tincture, and the solution for the essence, and all of those so infamous mistakes of the English chemical assistant, who of his business takes no interest. No! I will prepare, I will distil, I will formulate these *spécifiques* with all my skill and care. Let madame assure herself of that."

"And may I rely upon strict secrecy, Monsieur Thibaud?" I said. "Remember these are family recipes that have come down through generations. Many of my profession will hear of them. They will try and find out *who* prepares them, and of what they are composed."

"I swear by my faith in Christ that no one shall of André Thibaud procure so much as one little hint of such knowledge!" cried the little Frenchman eagerly.

"Then I am satisfied," I said. "I will deal only with you, and you in your turn must guarantee that you make no use of these recipes for your personal benefit. I will pay you each month for what you prepare. Is that satisfactory?"

"It is perfectly satisfactory," he assured me, "and I will write of it a paper and sign it, on condition that madame gives to me her business."

"I certainly will. I only hope, Monsieur Thibaud, that the business may prove good for both of us."

So we signed and sealed our bargain, and I left the little *pharmacie* with lighter heart and more hopeful spirit than I had known when, stumbling helplessly in the darkness of that fateful fog, I had clutched the arm of André Thibaud—and asked his aid.

Some curious impulse impelled me to take a passing omnibus going West. I wandered down Bond Street, examining the prosperous and well-advertised quarters of members of my profession. Evidently it was a popular and a paying one. Coroneted carriages stood waiting for rejuvenated beauties, who tripped gaily down the stairs of the specialist. I saw many women fresh from decorative fingers, or hurrying with mysterious parcels into brougham or victoria. Experience of humanity in general, and women in particular, led me into somewhat pessimistic speculations. This life of luxury, of sensuality, of the intoxication of vanity—what would be its ultimate result? To what useful or ennobling purpose did it tend? The senseless worship of fashion, and the sacrifices made at the shrine of that fickle goddess, were paraded here with an effrontery almost insolent. Wealth hustled wealth, and rank challenged rank, and yet both were but exponents of the very lowest form of human weakness. Self-gratification.

On every side were its evidences. The glittering gems in the jewellers' windows; the costly raiment; the fabulously expensive and useless millinery; the thousand trifles that lure some women to extravagance, and others to ruin—or to sin. And above it all I seemed to hear that never-answered query, that eternal note of the world's discontent—*cui bono*? An overpowering sensation of weariness came over me. This glitter of life, the life of a great city, in its wealthiest and most fashionable quarter, oppressed me here as it had oppressed me in the *Elysée* of Paris, in the *Linden* of Berlin, or the *Ring-Strasse* of Vienna. The same sights,

sounds and sensations had met me there; they would meet me, I knew, in all parts of the world, where civilization claimed its heritage of luxury. It was the hall-mark of modern existence. All simple, homely, natural things were being swept aside. Mere straws on an impetuous current. The new century was essentially a clamorous, an exacting, and a selfish one. And foremost in the ranks of noisy progress stood woman. Woman emancipated—triumphant—blatant. Woman parading herself, and her wants and her vanities, with ever-increasing volubility. Woman less content with what she had achieved than desirous of increasing her achievements. Woman restless, pleasure-loving, vain. A sisterhood of pleasure, sacrificing on their own selfish altars a sisterhood of pain.

All this vast show of raiment and gems, of toilet adjuncts and decorative art, were for women. Women stopped their carriages for purchases; women loitered before the dazzling windows; women sauntered through arcades of rare and costly flowers; women thronged the tea-rooms, and chattered and chirped and sent their shrill laughter echoing at every corner of the street, and went their way to club—or boudoir—or appointment, taking their fill of all that luxurious, idle, senseless life which for them seemed all-important.

My strictures were my own, even as was my criticism. All my life I had longed for freedom, and yet been hampered by countless petty restrictions. Now I knew that did I possess but a quarter the wealth of one of these daughters of fashion, it would not be Bond Street or Society that would see its expenditure.

The "wings of a dove" and the wilderness meant my life's tempting. To get away—beyond the pale of unreality. To stand face to face with the great truths of Nature and of Life. To know one's soul untrammelled. To feel in every pulse that triumphant throb of—freedom. Freedom from all the paltry shams and artificialities that meant life, as this

street and these people, these weary horses and yawning footman and hooting motors meant it.

Through the crowds of Piccadilly I sauntered on, jostled at every step by a crowd of foot-passengers, deafened by the perpetual din of traffic. I turned up one of the side streets for quietness. It was an eminently respectable street. Its shops bore that curious stamp of sober aloofness which bespeaks a reputation that needs no advertisement. Midway, however, the glitter of an extremely brilliant window—or rather set of windows—caught my eye. Some half-dozen women, fashionably dressed and distinctive, were crowded round one special spot of illumination. I stopped as I reached the outer circle, and looked over the shoulder of one of the number.

I was not surprised at the rapt faces, the curious *stillness* that distinguished the little crowd. The window was draped with silk and lace of exquisite tints and design. Electric light, in pale, rose-tinted globes, flashed on the single object of attraction that held all these gazers spell-bound.

It was only a woman's gown.

But such a gown! No mere words could convey its delicate loveliness of design—of colour—of effect. It was thrown with artistic carelessness over a seat—in itself a thing of beauty. It lay there with every exquisite fold revealing some new hint of colour or effect. With mellow softness of lace, and flashing, scintillating gleams of sequin, or of jewel. It was a gown fit for some rare queen of beauty, and each and all of that silent crowd of worshippers breathed a sigh of envy as they read the words on the card that lay at the foot of the exquisite robe :—

“Expressly designed and made for the Countess of Ripley  
by Madame Judas et Cie.”

“The Countess of Ripley?” I thought to myself. “Why! *surely it was of her that Lady Judith spoke this morning.*”

My thoughts fled back to words scarcely heeded at the time. To Lady Ormaroyd's description of the famous beauty at whose house she was to lunch. "The loveliest woman in London—and the wickedest."

And this gown was for her. Made expressly—so said the card. A fitting tribute to her beauty, no doubt; another tribute to that insatiable vanity which makes women the slaves of their worst instincts, and the murderers of their best. I looked, and looked—from the gown to the covetous eyes fastened upon it. I wondered in my own mind if any of these women would have strength to deny a tempter who should creep to their side and whisper, "This shall be yours if you will but worship—me."

A long-drawn sigh, born of pent-up emotions, of hushed delight, broke simultaneously from that circle of femininity. Its echo was lost in a sudden clatter of wheels and horses' feet. A carriage drew suddenly up at the door of the great *modiste's* establishment. The footman helped its occupant to alight. She was a stout, heavy person, muffled in furs and thickly veiled. She paused an instant and gave a rapid glance at the illuminated window. Then she entered the shop itself. Through the swing door I caught sight of an obsequious figure hurrying to receive her. Of a general stir and interest raised by her entry. Then the door fell back. A woman in the crowd spoke suddenly to a friend by her side.

"Do you know who that was?" I heard her say.

"No! Who?"

"Lady Judas herself. She runs this place, you know."

I turned away and went thoughtfully homewards. It seemed to me that Judas, the *modiste*, bore a curious resemblance to Lady Judith Vanderbyl.



#### IV

BARBE PICCOTÉE, smiling, white-capped, snowy-aproned, greeted me with the news that two ladies had called and made appointments for the next day. One was French, and hailed from that one and only earthly Paradise—Paris. They had represented all that was of the most charming, the most *chic*, the most affable, according to Barbe. They had been into the *petit salon*, and glanced at my “beauty sanctum,” and expressed admiration of my taste and arrangements.

“It is certain that madame goes to make the success,” concluded Barbe Piccotée, decisively. “Already, see how it marches that way! Two—three—four ladies, all of one day! But certainly they hear, they tell to one another of the *méthode* of madame. They bring to her the fame, the custom, the appreciation.”

“And, I hope, the money,” said madame herself, as she listened, and made rapid calculations as to trade expenses and outlay already incurred.

I threw off my outdoor wraps and settled myself by the fire to wait for dinner. I felt more hopeful of my enterprise, less afraid of failure than I had felt the previous day. That little “sprat” of an advertisement had already caught a few floating herrings, and I knew well that it lay in their power to bring in other fish to the net. Personal recommendation goes a long way in the profession I had chosen, and it would only rest with myself to make my *art a necessity*.

I did not trouble to ask myself whether such "art" was quite honest—whether the aid given to feminine artifice reflected creditably on its inventors or assistants. Women had always been vain from the hour that they recognised the power of beauty—the force of physical attraction. They had demanded more and more artificial assistance as civilization advanced. It was useless to pretend that that supreme power—Fashion—had not a following equally supreme of professional beauty-traders. The great cities of the world held hundreds of such "professors" of both sexes. The vast majority were humbugs, but they had for clients the most gullible and foolish section of humanity—the women of Society, and the women of that "half world" to whom money means the power of wanton wastefulness, and insatiable greed.

In both worlds personal vanity showed itself pre-eminent. The best looking, the best dressed, or the most wildly-eccentric member of each was the most notable—often the most popular. It was only the sober-minded middle-class woman who was "good"—who was domestic, and who reckoned the natural duties of wife and mother as the highest prerogatives of sex. Her high-born social sisterhood laughed her to scorn. For them life meant an eternal round of excitement and of pleasure. Lavish expenditure; being "in the swim" of all that was fast and reckless and reprehensible. To emulate man—and rival woman—and sail just as near the wind of external decency as the Divorce Court permitted, to insinuate themselves into every social function that meant "notoriety," to be seen—heard—remarked—flattered—criticised; this was their life. Its strain on nerve and body, and its perpetual exactions had inaugurated all this army of aids to beauty; of the masseuse, the toilet specialist, the skin-renewer, the electrolysist, the hair-dyer, the manicurist, the figure-developer, the figure-reducer. Behind these swarmed the countless thousands who live for women's service only. The

manufacturers of all those fabrics that adorn her; of those falsely-priced and falsely-valued gems she hangs about herself, even as do her black or ignorant sisters of the desert and the harem. Civilization at its supreme height has no power to eradicate vanity. It rather seems to minister to, and foster it. Yet, assuredly, before the spectacle of womankind decked in skins of beasts, in plumage of birds, in the humble insects' glittering scales, and the toiling workers' product of loom and mill, paying away gold that would aid starving millions for a mere bauble to hang on their persons, surely before such a spectacle as this the angels of Heaven might well turn away despairing faces!

And if I, as an insignificant unit, suffered myself to be carried into an unworthy scheme of life, was I to blame? Could my single voice or rebuke stem one current of this great whirlpool of folly? Could anyone — anything check it?

To me life had always seemed like a gigantic wheel, set spinning by an inquisitive Force. A Force that had said, "Go—turn—and turn—while I watch and see what your revolving means." And the wheel had begun to turn; at first, slowly; then with gathered power. With each revolution it gained strength and impetus. And still the Force behind it said, "Go on. There is more to discover."

So the wheel went on and on, and at last the Force grew alarmed at its own experiment, and cried, "Stop! It is enough!" But now the wheel could not stop. It was out of control. It was stronger than its own inventor. It turned on and on with ever increasing rapidity. Its revolutions were as a mighty wind, and in that wind was caught up all human things on the earth below, and in the spaces above, and they, too, whirled and whirled in maddening, riotous circles. Whirled amidst sin and sorrow and wild helplessness, for ever clutching at some power that might stay them, for ever loosening that clutch as the Force bore *them onwards to something that promised greater safety.* But

the promise was never fulfilled, for the great wheel could never be stayed or retarded, but would whirl on and on and on, till its own mad speed should work its own destruction.

It was not altogether my fault that I was a fatalist. Life had made me so. I represented a mere creature of chance floating down the current of circumstance. I looked above—about—around. I saw only other creatures, also of chance, drawn hither and thither by impulses they could not combat. Influenced by forces that only seemed ridiculous or inevitable when one set oneself to analyse their wherefore; and, more than all, it seemed to me that the one pure and holy influence set in the world to control and to uplift it, had been wantonly degraded and defiled. Woman, the virgin; woman, the mother; woman, the ideal, the goddess, the saviour of man—where was she? To what base form and likeness had she sunk? Here and there in the world's vast histories a star had shone out from the background of darkness and disaster. The star of a woman's love, a woman's self-sacrifice, a woman's heroism. But what star shone out in the present gloomy heaven of modern life, save that of vanity; of personal deification?

Woman had surrendered much to gain—little. It was the world she wanted to gain; the world she had wished to subjugate; and if, in gaining and in subjugating she lost her own soul, she seemed indifferent to the threatened loss—or was she only ignorant of it?

"Madame is served," said the voice of Barbe Piccotée. "I have twice announced that the soup it is on the table, but madame is in one long thought and disturbs not herself."

I lifted my head with a start. I looked at the honest concerned face of this Martha of mine. How good she was, how patient, how true. How she had stood by me in my hours of darkness and despair; and now, how carefully she ministered to my needs and attended to my comfort.

"Truly Barbe," said I, half laughing at the rebuking face. "If there were ten such women-folk as you in this

wicked city, God might be induced to spare it for your sakes."

She looked at me, not quite comprehending the trend of my thought or its expression.

"Is it that madame perplexes her brain over the so many difficulties of life?" she asked. "Madame would be the happier if she could but confess them all to *le bon Dieu*. Me, I take no trouble, I do not perplex my soul. I say, 'the Holy Mother, who herself was woman once, as I am woman, she understands; she will comfort.' For me—that is enough."

"I wish it was enough for me, Barbe," said I.

But I knew it was not—and never would be.

\* \* \* \* \*

The two cards left that afternoon bore the respective names of Madame de Montserrat, and Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley. These two ladies arrived at half-past ten the next morning in a motor car, and announced a desire to try my system of face massage.

I began to think that most of the women who went in for complexion treatment made a point of going the round of all advertising specialists, either in order to compare their methods, or out of mere curiosity. These visitors, who appeared great friends, rattled off quite a number of names and places favoured by their "on approbation" system. They were both very pretty women, and only required simple treatment.

Their conversation was very amusing; so much so, that I made a mental note of it. They began by abusing massage, and then agreed that, once begun, one could not possibly do without it. They were quite sure also that certain well-known members of Society possessed wonderful toilet secrets, or employed very discreet artificers. They rattled off famous names known to me by repute, and including royal and aristocratic personages. When they heard I had *studied* in Paris they evinced deep interest.

Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley submitted herself first to my treatment. Her friend looked on and chattered. It spoke well for the sincerity of their feelings that they made no secrecy about toilet matters. But, as yet, neither had much to fear from revelation.

I smoothed back Mrs. Audley's crisp waves of hair, and covered it with soft muslin, preparatory to steaming her skin. I felt agreeably surprised at finding a natural background for treatment. In fact, had I not entered upon a career of dishonesty, I should have advised her to let her face severely alone. But I had a reputation to gain. I could not afford such ruinous frankness.

"She is beautiful, is she not, madame?" exclaimed Madame de Montserrat. "Me—how I envy that thick, clear skin and so perfect colouring. There is but one other woman of note herein London who has a skin like that; and the colour so warm and rich of it. Perhaps you know of her, Madame Beaudelet? She is quite a queen of her set; so smart, so lovely; of a *chic incroyable*. One calls her Mrs. Dickey Johnson?"

I pricked up ears of attention.

"I *have* heard of her," I said.

"That, of course," remarked Mrs. Audley, "she is as well known as the Houses of Parliament. They say we are alike, you know. In these days of 'doubles' that is a fact at once useful and annoying. Useful to her; annoying to me. When her escapades are laid to my credit everyone believes them. When *my* innocent deeds demand god-mothering, she professes ignorance of my existence. Our lives are spent in the pursuit of *alibis*; and in proving to our own and our friends' satisfaction that we could not possibly have ever been in a compromising situation."

"I shall be curious to see this lady," said I. "It is not altogether unlikely I may do so. Lady Judith Vanderbyl has promised to mention my name to her."

Mrs. Audley opened quick, surprised eyes. "Lady Judas has been to you *then*? That old fright! Good Heavens!

What could all the massage and paints and powder in creation do for *her* !”

“But no, that is wrong, *ma chère*,” interrupted her friend quickly. “For it chanced that I saw Miladi Judith but last night. She was at the Theatre of St. James, and never, I assure you, have I seen her look so well—so less frightful of all respects. You may believe ; it is so.”

“Did you make her up, Madame Beaudelet ?” asked Mrs. Audley, curiously.

“Yes,” I said. “It was no easy task.”

“Very creditable, I should say. She is quite the ugliest woman in London. In fact she prides herself upon that title to distinction.”

“Madame Beaudelet robbed it of her for once,” said Madame de Montserrat. “She looked *tout à fait convenable*. To say that of the Lady Judith—or Judas, as one calls her—is to say much.”

“She certainly used to look an object,” exclaimed Mrs. Audley. “But then most Englishwomen make up atrociously. They will *overdo* it. They are as frank about their national deceptions as their national virtues.”

“They might certainly take example by their French neighbours,” said I, as I set down the vaporizer, and prepared to cream the soft, elastic skin of my interesting client.

“We of France, we know our defects and how to qualify them,” observed Madame de Montserrat.

“And we of England, we pretend not to know we possess defects, and therefore exaggerate them, said her friend. “Heaven send my day of disillusion while I have sense enough to accept it ! It’s bound to come ! Alas, poor women, what a life is ours !”

“There are other things *ma chère*, to compensate for fading beauty,” said Madame de Montserrat, “and as for you—what have you to fear ? That perfect skin, that lovely *hair*, that figure, so divinely tall—is it not so, madame

She, my friend, has the beauty that goes to last, to endure. She is not as me, so *petite*, of a skin so dark that but a few years it needs to become sallow and hideous.

"Nonsense Julie! You hideous. Wait till you are like Jeanne de Creusac!"

"The Comtesse Creusac is not hideous. She is but of an agreeable ugliness. Besides, who thinks of it? She is so well-dressed, so well coiffured, so vivacious, so brilliant; her manner, it is so charming that all the men adore and all the women are friends of her. What if her complexion is put on, and her *transformations* are of Monseieur André, she is all the time so *gai*, so *chic*. Who cares?"

"*Elle ne sait s'encanailler*, that is the secret," murmured Mrs. Audley.

"A useful one and popular, *chère* Julie. One that we of England—we others, as you say, are rapidly catching up."

"It suits you not," observed the little French woman. "The English lady, she is not now any more *grande dame*, nor is she altogether *chic*. She wants to be of the all-around good sort. But the all-around good sort, it is loud, it is noisy, it is slangy. It goes to make the man-woman, who plays the hockey and the golf, and hunts the fox, and fishes the river, and drives the automobile. Who smokes always the cigarette, and drinks the soda-whisky with the men at night. Faugh! how I hate her, the man-woman, with her loud voice and her coarse manners, and her *odeur abominable* of the stable and the cigarette and the soda-whisky! I love the woman of sex—dainty, alluring, *un peu coquette*, *un peu provocative*, who can love, and who can perchance lose herself for love's sake; who has a heart for home and children; who——"

"*Tais-toi*, Julie! This is rank heresy," laughed her friend. "There is no place for such women in our world of to-day, and no need of them. The coquette—yes! but not your woman of heart—your woman of home. Home? Why, what do we know of such a place by such a name? We



have our flat, and our club, and our friend's houses, and our own *pied à terre*, where we dress and sleep, and occasionally have a meal; but *home*—the word is as old-fashioned as maternity, as *demodé* as a past season's gown!"

There was a bitter ring in her voice. I felt her words were less exponents of what she meant than of what she assumed to mean. Her friend was silent for a moment, watching my manipulations.

"With life as it is—as one finds it," she said, suddenly. "Why do we then take so much trouble about ourselves; our appearance—our popularity?"

Mrs. Audley glanced at her, then at me, then at the mirror.

"Ah, *why*?" she said. "You might tell us that, Madame Beaufort? There can be few illusions in the *atelier* of the beauty doctor!"

"Please do not give me *that* odious name," I said, quickly. "I detest it. I make no pretensions of giving beauty. I only aid its preservation."

"Did you say that to Lady Judas?" she asked.

"You mean Lady Judith Vanderbyl? Yes. I was quite frank with her. It would have been useless to be anything else. She is quite aware of her own—limitations."

They both laughed.

"She hates me, you know," continued Mrs. Audley, "and I return the feeling cordially. Thank goodness we don't often meet. Do you know who and what she is?"

"I have her own word for it that she is the most hated woman in London," I said. "But she gave no reason for the assertion, nor did I ask it."

"She spoke the truth. Her husband was a Dutch merchant who made an enormous fortune in wines or something, and then went in for finance. He married her because she had a title. They used to fight like tigers, but after some half-dozen years of cat and dog life old Vanderbyl died, and left *her with one son* and all his fortune. She is simply

wallowing in wealth. But she has the most extraordinary fads. People say that that wonderful *modiste's* shop in Dover Street is her's. Have you ever seen it? You should. It is the apotheosis of feminine vanity and feminine extravagance. There is nothing like it in London. Every room has its own scheme of colour; its own special use. The models are all living figures. There is a sort of stage where they walk about and display various costumes designed for every sort of occasion, and expressive of the most frightful prices. A Judas gown is a psynonym for speedy bankruptcy, and many a woman has lived to rue the day that she got into its clutches. For my own part I look upon the establishment as a subtle scheme of revenge; she has a good many scores to pay off against her sex; she has divined a sure method of doing it."

"I fail to see how this establishment could become part of a scheme of vengeance," I said, wonderingly.

"Of course you can't see it, very few of its customers and supporters can; but to me the idea is perfectly plain. Some day the truth will out, and then there'll be a fine show up. There are not a dozen women, including royalties, who could afford the prices Judas et Cie ask for their gowns. Yet they have some hundreds of women on their books; our friend, Mrs. Dickey Johnson, among them. But I doubt if Mrs. Dickey pays the bills. Her husband owns a large motor-car business, has agents all over the world, and is constantly obliged to travel in order to see how his affairs go on. It seems an admirable arrangement—for his wife."

She laughed maliciously, then rose from the "rest" chair and looked long and critically at herself. She gave a nod of satisfaction. "Very good. I am inclined to believe in you, Madame Beaufilet; and, thank Heaven, you don't put on rouge and stuff when one is not looking! One woman made me into a perfect clown! She never allowed me to look into the glass till her process was over. Well, it was over

once for all with her. I never went to her again. Now, Julie, it is your turn; I think you will be pleased with Madame Beaudelet's method."

"But, certainly. I am sure of it," said the little French woman.

She slipped off her toque and her motor coat, and sat down before the toilet glass.

"For me I use the make up, *un petit peu*. What would you, then? Nature is not kind to all women. And one does not wish that one's husband finds attraction elsewhere. I make myself so *chic*, so pleasing as possible. He sees I look bright—well—*en grande toilette*. He says, 'my wife she has charm for me still.' And then he gives me the big cheque for my so '*chic*' gowns, and we are both—*content*."

## V

THAT night I surveyed my book of appointments with some satisfaction. The satisfaction was heightened by the arrival of the last post. It brought me a letter from the redoubtable Mrs. Dickey Johnson, and requested me to call on her at twelve the next day. She mentioned that I had been recommended by Lady Judith Vanderbyl, which proved that eccentric person as good as her word. I expected her at half-past ten, so that would enable me to keep the appointment at Hill Street, Park Lane—the address given by the new applicant.

I summoned Barbe to my assistance in making up sundry parcels ordered by the various customers, or through the post. It seemed as if luck were turning in my favour. The profession I had adopted promised to be more remunerative than I had imagined possible.

We were busy with corrugated paper and string and sealing-wax, when the bell sounded. Barbe went away to answer it, and returned ushering in Monseieur Thibaud. He apologized for the late hour, and gave the reasons for his intrusion.

"One of those recipes of madame—it is of incalculable difficulty to prepare. I cannot obtain it at the wholesale druggists or the herbalists, one so strange ingredient that claims to be necessary. I have written to Paris—to one very clever friend I there have. He to-night wires that he could secure me what I ask, but it costs very dear. One hundred francs. So I come to madame to ask if she will

have it, or make use of something more cheap—more simple?"

"No," I said. "Other specialists may put up with makeshifts. I am determined I won't do so."

He bowed. "It shall be as madame wishes. But may one ask if it would inconvenience madame to advance to me the money? My friend—he say I must send a *monnaie-order*, as he cannot otherwise procure the drug. I would not trouble madame, but that I have a little too heavy expenses just of present. My daughter, she has fallen sick, and she gets not better for many months. I have had the *docteur*—the specialist, as you say—but they do her no good. She gets not better. And she have lost her work—the type-writing at one great office of the Strand. They gave her place to another; they do not wait for her health. That is my position, madame. I am sorry—I am *désolé* that I have to trouble you with my so *triste* affairs, but what can I?"

"I will give you the money, of course," I said. "After all, it is for my own stuff. There is no reason for you to be inconvenienced."

"You are very good, madame! It is not all ladies of your profession who think of inconvenience caused to our's. We who prepare. Some—I have heard of them—run up the so heavy bills, and cannot be made to pay save just a little sum now, and a little sum later on—of account—so they call it. It goes hard for us to live, and not to make the debts. I—I, who tell this, was once a prosperous man, but I made myself the bankrupt over the debts of other people. But there, one must take what *le bon Dieu* sends. Is that not so, madame?"

"Or life brings," said I.

He looked at me with his sad and dreamy eyes. "Life?" But then is not life the gift of *le bon Dieu*, madame?"

I sighed. The memory of many weary tramps over *fields of speculation* was with me. I could not force any

admission of providential dealings to my lips; but I revered such simple faith as that of Barbe Piccotée—of this simple old man. Only for myself I could not see what they saw, feel as they felt, trust as they trusted in some mystical far-off Power.

I went over to my bureau and took out a £5 note, and gave it to Monseieur Thibaud. He thanked me gratefully. "May I come and see your daughter?" I asked him, as he took up his shabby old felt hat. "It must be lonely for her, lying sick and——"

I stopped abruptly. I remembered the little dark, close shop, the smell of drugs, the shabby, dusty parlour. What a place for an invalid; sunless, dreary, poverty-stricken; and yet I hesitated to intrude as I saw the quick look of consternation on his face.

"Madame is all that is most good, most kind,," he stammered." It would be a great honour. But there are days, times, when the poor *petite*, she is not quite convenient; she is peevish, querulous. But what would you? It is hard to suffer bodily pain when one is young, and life should hold some pleasure."

"And yet you accept this for your child as only a visitation of *le bon Dieu*?" said I.

"But, yes, madame. How otherwise?" He raised mild eyes of wonder to my face. "The world and we, His creatures, are but the offspring of His will. What He sees fit to grant us, that we must accept, and often it has seemed to me, madame, that we are not half grateful for what we do possess, while we possess it; and then to punish our ingratitude and humble us, and so bring us back to Him, we are sent suffering, and trouble, and grief."

"It sounds all very simple and very pathetic as you say it, Monsieur Thibaud; but I am afraid I am not so easily contented. I want to get behind the scenes. To know the wherefore of these apparently undeserved afflictions, as well as to have to experience them?"

"Is it then that madame is not of the true Church That she has not the Faith."

"I am of no Church," I said. "And as for Faith—that much abused word—do *you* know what it is, Monsieur Thibaud? The faculty of belief in something we cannot understand, or prove understandable by the limited reasoning power granted to man. A child accepts; a child believes; but man ceases to be a child when his mind awakens and his soul cries out for certainty."

"Ah, madame!" he cried. "You are clever, and you have perhaps read many books, and seen much of life. But I—well—I have no words. I am not clever, save in that one study to which I gave my mind and my years. And so I can only say that in my heart there is still the faith of the child, and the trust of the child, and that I am happy for that it is so."

"Happy?" I said, and looked at him. There he stood—old, frail, shabby; with age and poverty to face; with only one human tie, and that a sickly and querulous child—and he called himself happy. It was incomprehensible!

"Yes, madame," he went on, slowly turning his shabby hat round and round. "For see you, in all life it is not one colour, but many; and even in the subdued and sober hues there is beauty—of a sort. I look at my dull colours, and they seem to rest my eyes; and sometimes when the sun shines out, and the air blows soft with spring—and Julie, she is not altogether peevish and discontented—and a little good fortune, like the visit of madame, comes to me—I can thank *le bon Dieu* with all my heart. I can remember that of this joy I was not worthy. But it comes, and so will come other joy—another life. I cannot say *why* I feel it, but it is there—always—in my heart."

"And nothing shakes that belief?"

"Nothing, madame."

I sighed. One could not argue with conviction so assured. *One could only* envy it. I envied it; but all the same I

knew it was a thing born of instinct, of priestly instruction, of long years of unquestioning credulity. It was a thing impossible to myself. I loved neither Church nor creed, neither their professing, nor professors. Yet I respected this simple old man because I felt he spoke truth. The truth of what he felt to be true. That I, with all my knowledge of life, the world, humanity, could only proclaim false and faithless, because to me it made no appeal.

"Is it that I detain, madame; I will trespass no longer," said Monsieur Thibaud, suddenly. "I express again my thanks."

He looked at me long and wistfully. "Madame, you have youth and beauty, and the brains that are clever, and the intelligence that makes for great happiness or great misery. Think how many others in this great, sad, terrible city have nothing; only despair, only misery, only hopelessness. Figure to yourself what would it be to face Death in such a darkness? Think what would they do, *les pauvres misérables*, if they believed not in *le bon Dieu*, who alone offers consolation."

"A possible consolation," said I. "For the *sure* and horrible realities they endure first!"

"The reward will atone, madame. That and the consciousness that one has done one's duty."

"Oh, *duty*! that everlasting parrot cry. Why, Monsieur Thibaud, that word is responsible for half the mistakes, the persecutions, the misery of life. The duty of one man is to make wretched another; to give suffering and unhappiness to that other with the best intentions and—the worst results. Duty! Why it has meant punishment, mental torture, disquietude, self-delusion, self-sacrifice, ever since the Church expounded its meaning. It may be one man's meat, but it is also another man's poison. It has created wholesale murderers under the name of patriotism, and set human lives as targets for the brutal shots of Revolution! Duty! Don't talk to me of duty! Were all the errors



and terrors of life frankly exposed, instead of being studiously hidden, it is Duty that would take foremost place in the ranks of human mistakes."

The thin, old, wrinkled face flushed suddenly. "Some mistakes, madame," he said, "are nobler than some virtues."

\* \* \* \* \*

The echo of his words lingered long after his departure. Lingered with me as I sat meditative and alone, after Barbe Piccotée had locked up and retired to rest in her own little chamber next the tiny kitchen.

For it seemed to me that I had been a long martyr to duty. The duty of a faithful wife to an unfaithful husband. Obedience had meant my acceptance of marriage, and fidelity had forged its fetters of endurance.

When they snapped I had my reward! Freedom, hampered by debt—by dishonour—by poverty. Freedom, that left me to battle as I best might with life and the future. I looked around my insignificant rooms, and remembered the wealth and splendour that had once been mine. I remembered, too, how recklessly and ruthlessly it had been squandered. Not by myself, but by its possessor. He had cared nothing for suffering or distress that might come after his own surfeit of pleasure. He had left me to face mockery or indifference; the treachery of false friends, the shameful disclosures of vile women; all the sensual, evil, degrading revelations that make up the life of the *roué*, and the record of most French husbands!

It was little wonder that I felt bitter. That for men I had no feeling save contempt, and in women no faith that was untinged by suspicion. The profession I had chosen was one that flung open all the doors of feminine vanity for my inspection. I wondered whether I should have a single illusion left by the time I had achieved Bond Street, and the Pictorial Press!

## VI

LADY JUDITH arrived with due punctuality and less advertisement of the decorative art than had distinguished her first visit.

"I have made my maid use only your cream, and the liquid rouge," she said frankly, "and I have been sounding your praises everywhere. Have you had any enquiries?"

I mentioned Mrs. Dickey Johnson and the two friends who had visited me the previous day.

"That Audley woman!" she exclaimed, "Dunstaine Audley?"

"Yes," I said.

"Umph!—Well, *she's* no credit to anyone! A thorough bad lot! Did you ever hear her story? It was a nine days' wonder?"

"I have lived chiefly in Paris, you know," I explained. "I seldom saw an English paper."

"It was a divorce case, of course," continued Lady Judith, settling herself comfortably in the "rest" chair, and closing her eyes. "She married, when quite young, a man who was fabulously rich; but—well, not strong-minded. After a year she demanded a divorce. It appeared that poor Audley (she keeps the name, you see, with her own as an appendant) developed a sort of religious mania. He was captured by one of those new-fangled sects that prey on weak-minded fools. They made him believe he was a sort of saint, and he used absolutely to *shovel* out money into their hands! He would not live with his wife; and all *his* money was being spent on these religious

lunatics. He built them a temple which cost a quarter of a million, and he used to preach there himself. She could not stand it, and she was furious at the money going out in such a fashion. So she brought a most horrible accusation against him, and dragged in one or two of the New Brotherhood along with it. The case was, of course, heard in *camera*; and, being very young and very beautiful, she won it (you may guess why). But the sequel was odd. Poor Audley suddenly got sick of these horse-leeches, with their eternal "~~pay, pay, pay~~" He flung them over, but made them a present of the temple, which they could not afford to keep up. It's now a music hall. Then he contracted malarial fever in Rome; died, and left the residue of his fortune—which was still considerable—to his divorced wife! Of course *that* whitewashed her, and she has been living in a second-rate set ever since. If rumour goes for anything, it is a pretty rapid set, and she has had numerous—episodes. But she has never married again. She is a sworn foe to the bonds of Hymen, and enjoys her questionable liberty according, as seems good unto her. As I told you, I cut her after the divorce. One could not really tolerate a woman who had brought such a case, even though one knew the man was a perfect fool. But there had been cases of religious mania in the family more than once. It dated back to Puritan days, so it's not to be wondered at. Don't you think that 'Bare-the-bone Jackson,' and 'Smite-the-sinner-Smith,' and all that canting crew have left responsibilities behind them?"

I had listened without interruption. The story was not pleasant or creditable, but, as my French friends say, "what would you?" Life is the same wherever one goes. A great deal of sin, a great deal of hypocrisy, a great deal of suffering; and, to leaven it all, some tiny speck of human goodness, heroism, virtue!

While Lady Judith's bitter tongue lashed her sex mercilessly, I was summing up Lady Judith's own qualifications

or judgment. It seemed as if she had not a good word to say of anything feminine. Her animus carried its sting into personal and impersonal matters alike; into mention of friend or foe, rank or file. Some special venom was in her to-day, and it seemed a satisfaction to her to vent it on all subjects we discussed. They were—it goes without saying—purely feminine subjects. I thought once or twice of that wonderful establishment in Dover Street; of that wonderful gown with its card of appropriation; of the wonderful woman—to me only a name—who was to wear it. I tried to introduce that name, but my strange client seemed to freeze up into silence when I mentioned it. But the expression on her face grew so dark and full of hatred, that I felt there was something behind this reticence. Something crouched, tiger-like, for a spring, and when the spring came it would mean a tearing to pieces, a rending asunder, savage and brutal, as is all feminine revenge.

I was a little surprised at Lady Judith's extraordinary amount of information; at her acquaintance with Art, Literature, Science, Physiology. At her knack of stripping social life of its shams; of displaying the mechanism of the puppets, and the unclean hands that worked that mechanism.

She developed a cruel realism. She seemed to have missed something in life that goes to soften women's hearts, and give them faith in a future. But these were things that I too had missed and that made no appeal to me. The pages of the Human Document laid bare by her insight were pages I too had scanned. The sins of sex, painted by her merciless hand, were true to what lies at the core of every woman's heart; denied always—yet there hidden like a lurking foe. For woman, from the days of Eve, has ever played the hypocrite to others—and to herself; and in her desire to be worshipped and adored has rushed wildly from the extremes of so-called virtue to the extremes of so-called vice.

It was because I knew so much of women, and *meant* to know so much more, that Lady Judith interested me. She seemed to hold the key to a door I longed to open. I had heard comparisons between the women of England and the women of France till I was weary. I had been told that we were dull, cold, stupid on the one part; and bold, hard, vicious, on the other.

Life offered me the opportunity of making discoveries. I desired to make them. My own feelings were perfectly unbiassed. As women showed themselves to me, so I resolved to show them to themselves. I could only deal with such types as I met professionally, but they were surely representative enough for my purpose. In Lady Judith Vanderbyl I saw the soul and essence of my scheme. By her aid I could be admitted into the boudoir and dressing-room of most social celebrities. I could judge for myself as to their uses, their virtues, their importance in that scheme of worldly advantage which to them and their sisterhood of pleasure meant the scheme of creation.

When I had finished making my strange client as presentable as art and falsehood could make an ugly face, I ventured a few hints on my own ambitions.

She regarded me with long, steady scrutiny. "If you really mean it?"—she said—then paused abruptly. "No," she went on rapidly. "Not yet. I won't tell you what was in my mind. I must know you better. I trust no one—man or woman. Though, in my own mind, if it came to doing so rash a thing I would rather trust a bad man than a good (?) woman!"

She rose from the chair, and I handed her her hat and cloak in silence. I glanced, for the first time, at the clock, and saw, to my surprise, that it only wanted ten minutes of the appointment fixed by Mrs. Dickey Johnson.

"Good gracious! I have to be at Hill Street at twelve!" I exclaimed.

*Lady Judith's eyes followed mine*

"An appointment?"

"Mrs. Dickey Johnson. My first visit——"

"Put on your hat and I'll drive you. No, for goodness sake, don't waste time in thanks. Mrs. Dickey is a special friend of mine. Almost as dear a one as the beautiful Countess of Ripley!"

The sarcasm in her voice was eloquent of her feelings. I made no comment, however. I threw on a long cloak, almost like a nursing sister's, and tied an equally representative bonnet under my chin. Then I took up my bag of "specialities," and followed Lady Judith to her carriage.

The ten minutes had nearly touched fifteen when I found myself confronting a supercilious footman in a lavishly decorated and appointed hall. He was evidently deceived by my nursing garb.

"There hain't no one ill 'ere, Miss," he said, "and I've 'ad no instructions——"

"Take my card to your mistress," I said quickly, and seated myself to await his return.

After some delay a junior epitome of fashionable uselessness appeared. He took me upstairs and then gave me in charge of a smart maid. Under her guidance I found myself introduced into a luxurious and very lovely dressing-room.

A still lovelier-looking person sat before the toilet table. A little French *coiffeur* was putting the finishing touches to her elaborately waved hair.

Our eyes met in the glass. "Madame Beaufilet?" she questioned.

"Yes Madame."

"Lady Judith Vanderbyl and my friend Lady Ormaroyd have been cracking you up to the skies," she said carelessly. "They say your system is out and out the best yet introduced."

She gave a curt little nod to the *coiffeur* in reply to his "*J'ai l'honneur de faire mes adieux, Madame*"

"*À demain. Dix heures et demi,*" she answered, then turned quickly to me.

"Understand, please, that I do not require massage treatment—as yet. My skin is perfect—but I think it as well to use certain preparations, especially before and after motoring. I've always fought shy of advertising *masseuses*. Every woman should understand the hygiene of her own body and her own skin. I don't believe in steaming, so you needn't bring out that vaporiser. What else have you? Some wonderful cream, isn't it? Well, I don't mind your trying that. But be most careful. You don't come across such skin and such colouring as mine every day of your life!"

She spoke with the supreme insolence of vanity, but she was quite right. Her skin was absolutely perfect, and her colouring as delicate as the petals of a rose-geranium. Added to these charms she possessed a mass of red-brown hair, and deep blue eyes. Her mouth was curved and deeply red; the vivid, almost unnatural red of a poppy.

Evidently Mrs. Dickey was by way of being one of the noted beauties of social life, as well as a Court favourite. Lady Ormaroyd had hinted at both claims to notoriety. Lady Judith had emphasized the hint. I drew my own conclusions.

Luxury was the key-note of every appointment of the lovely chamber, as also of its fair owner. From the silver and cut glass of the toilet table; the filmy lace and satin of the hangings; the exquisite scheme of colour (all faint rose and deep ivory, blending into opal-green suggestions), down to the snowy rugs on the floor, all spelt wealth and sensuous tastes. The self-deification of feminine beauty.

Through the open door beyond I caught sight of a bedroom, showing the same scheme of colour. The bed was low and shaped like a shell. Filmy draperies of pale rose and delicate lace fell around it from a large gilt crown *let into the ceiling*.

Further on, again, was a bath-room of cream-coloured marble and silver fittings. The modern goddess of beauty shows a due appreciation of the settings of her shrine! I summed up Mrs. Dickey as one of the women of her epoch, who believed in the adoration of the senses; to whom her surroundings meant a tribute to her own beauty—and her own vanity. But, all the same, I could not help admiring that beauty. She lay back with closed eyes, soothed by my magnetic touch; and it seemed to me that the harshest critic could find no flaw in those perfect features or that exquisite skin.

That the face was souless and selfish would matter nothing. Beauty so secure and so perfect could defy all cavilling. Doubtless she had proved its efficacy again and again. She opened her brilliant eyes at last. They looked languid and soft under the spell of my soothing offices.

"It's delightful!" she said, drowsily.

Then she sat up and examined herself critically. "If it would only last! If anything, anyone, could assure me that I should remain as I am *now*—twenty-five and beautiful—Madame Beaufilet, I would—yes, I *mean* it—I would sell my soul, as Faust sold his!"

She put down the silver-mounted hand-glass, and looked into the large lace-draped mirror on the toilet-table.

"It is cruel of life, of Time, to rob a woman of *that*," she said. "Sometimes I have a hateful dream. I see lines *here*"—she traced her delicate forehead with one slender finger—"I see white hairs growing thickly amongst *this*," she touched the chestnut waves that rippled off her brow. "I seem to have a new face, a thing of haggard outlines; fleshy chin, faded colour; and I wake, cold, and trembling, and sick—to find it a nightmare! But nightmares are prophetic."

She shuddered. She turned an eager, feverish gaze on me. "You are a pretty woman, too! Have you ever had *such a nightmare*? Do you dread the evil days before



you—before us all—if we live long enough? And yet—who doesn't want to live, if only—only—life wasn't to be cursed by the fate of age?"

"But there is beauty even in age," I said. "It has its own charm; its own compensations."

She laughed, and her laugh was harsh and unmusical. "Oh! those preachy things! I know what you mean. But I'm not that sort. I must *live*. Live every day—every hour! I am full of energy and desire. I can never see enough—do enough—enjoy enough! And I want it to continue. I would pay anything—agree to anything—if only I could be assured that I should look as I look now—to day—for every day of the next twenty-five years!"

"That would mean fifty," I said, thoughtfully. "Well, Ninon de L'Enclos preserved her beauty to sixty, so they say."

She searched my face eagerly. "Do *you* know anything; have you an Elixir of Beauty? I don't care what it costs; money comes to women who are beautiful as a right. I would make your fortune, Madame Beaufort, if you had such a recipe."

I shook my head.

"No, madam. I have no magic charm. I can only promise to save your skin and care for it. But I cannot keep the lustre in your eyes, the sheen in your hair, the grace and contour of your figure. No one can."

She sighed heavily.

"I suppose you are right. I believe you speak the truth. But a woman doesn't *want* to believe a truth she dislikes. There lies the secret of successful quackery. Well, I must try and keep myself in condition, that's all. It's very hard, too. For the wear and tear of modern life is as disastrous to beauty as are emotions. If I hadn't killed out feeling I should be wrinkled by now!"

She rose and threw back her wrapper, and showed *herself in transparent lace and silken underwear*.

So insolently beautiful was she that I could only gaze in fascinated silence.

"I want to look my best to-night," she said, suddenly. "It is the night of the famous *tableaux* at Lady Ripley's. Of course you have heard of her?"

"Who has not?"

"We are rivals for popular favour," she went on. "I have the advantage of years; not many, but they count. She has to resort to art. Still, no one can help acknowledging she is very lovely."

She moved away into the adjoining room, and rang for her maid. I put up my various chattels, and wondered whether she had forgotten that my fees were always paid in advance. As I was hesitating what to do, she suddenly called out: "Come to me the day after to-morrow, Madame Beaufort, and I'll arrange about future treatments! Come early—ten o'clock!"

I lacked courage to advance professional matters, and merely saying I would be with her at that hour, I went downstairs and let myself out.

## VII

I WALKED through the Park to the Corner. It was remarkably crowded for the time of the year; but Parliament had its hands full of troublesome business, which necessitated the presence of influential members—and party adherents. And many people were “passing through” on their way to Cairo, or India, or the Riviera. Perhaps this accounted for Lady Ripley’s much talked of “*petit saison*” entertainment, of which the papers had given discreet hints, and of which I had just heard from Mrs. Dickey Johnson.

I wondered if that wonderful Judas gown had been specially prepared for this entertainment. I wondered, also, if Lady Judith would be present? She had not mentioned any such intention—even after acknowledging the lovely Countess as one of her “dear friends.”

When I reached home Barbe informed me that Lady Ormaroyd had called and left a message. “Would I come to her that evening at six o’clock, without fail. If not able to come, would I wire and fix another hour.”

I laughed to myself. My business had not yet reached such a point of importance that “hours” were filled up. I could quite easily have gone to Lady Ormaroyd at any time that afternoon or evening.

When I did present myself, I found her anxiously awaiting me. “I want you to give a whole hour to me, Madame Beaufort,” she said. “I never looked so well, or *lasted* so well, as the other day after your treatment; and to night I want to look my *very* best. It is an occasion when all the *beauties* and all the smart folk will be gathered together.”

"The Countess of Ripley's *tableaux*, is it not? I read something about it in the Post," I remarked.

"Yes. They are to be very special, very *chic*. Lady Ripley herself takes part in one. It has been kept a dead secret; even the rehearsal was private. We are all on the *qui vive*. It is sure to be something very surprising—or very audacious. There seems no limit to what that fair lady will do."

"One hears and reads a great deal about her," I observed. "I was with your friend Mrs. Dickey Johnson, this morning. She is to be at the entertainment."

"Oh! of course. The sun of royal favour shines on that lovely head at present, and she goes everywhere, and is "in" everything; she and Lady Ripley are great rivals. They are quite opposite types of beauty. Dickey has that lovely Titian hair, and cream and rose colouring. Lady Ripley is dark, and possesses a magnificent Junoesque figure. Oh! How I envy fine women, Madame Beaufort. We others haven't a look in now-a-days; and as for gowns—well, the dressmakers don't seem to care what guys they make of us. We don't do them any credit. Don't show off their styles, or favour their eccentricities. . . . (How heavenly that steaming process is!) Women like Dickey and Lady Rip—we always call her that, *en intime*, you know—set off their gowns so well that they are not required to pay for them. I know, for a positive fact, that one *modiste* makes for the Countess for nothing; just because she advertises her to rich Americans, and wealthy nobodies who *do* pay on the nail."

"I am getting quite anxious to see this wonderful Countess," I said.

"Perhaps you will. I'm afraid though it wouldn't be any use to recommend you professionally, because she employs someone in Paris. It's a dead secret, and we can't find out who it is. But I will certainly mention you—if you like?"

"I should be very grateful. I am extremely anxious to work up a business and get known in a good set."

"I feel very much for your position. I think it extremely plucky of you to face the world as you are doing. What really made you think of it?"

I told her of the old, famous recipes, and of my friend, the French doctor, and his advice to try my luck in London,

"And your luck began with old Lady Judas," she said.

"Yes. I must confess I felt rather hopeless when I saw her."

She laughed softly. "I should think you did feel hopeless. Poor Lady Ju—she is dreadfully ugly. But, for all that, she is a power in the social world. We are all afraid of her tongue, her temper, her wealth, her spite. She makes no secret of her contempt for women. I often think that that *modiste's* establishment is part of a deep laid scheme of vengeance.

"I have heard something of the sort before—when speaking of that business."

"Yes. Well, my theory is that she established it in order to get certain well-known society women into her clutches. The place is a perfect temple of vanity. It means simply ruin to deal there. The costumes, the *lingerie*, the special Judas corset for the special Judas gown; the fabulous charges for trimming, for designs—why, Paquin and Felix, and Jay and Worth, are'n't in it with these people. I have a firm conviction that Miladi Judas knows a thing or two about bill-discounting, and loans, and convenient advances. Old Vanderbyl was connected with a firm of Jewish money-lenders. She has a considerable interest in the firm still. Her son, no doubt, would have been in his father's place had he lived. By the way, there was some mystery about that boy and his death. She simply worshipped him. I believe he was the only human being for whom she ever cared."

"Did he die young?" I asked.

"Only nineteen! He was very handsome, too; and, of course, spent money as he pleased. I wasn't in town at the time of his death. It was supposed to be—suicide!"

"What—at nineteen!—and with such prospects?"

"A woman in it, of course. Probably that is one reason why his mother hates us all so bitterly. For years after his death she was never seen. Then she reappeared, and commenced this secret crusade. Some day the *lex talionis* will claim more than one frail beauty! Thank goodness, I've never been tempted to that emporium of sartorial art! I may be a fool. My daughter says I am. But at least I've kept clear of debt and scandal, and the claws of Judas et Cie."

"Will she be there to-night?" I asked.

"I think not. She dresses the Countess, but she seldom sets foot in her house. There is a tacit feud between them. If you ever see them together you will understand what I mean."

I went silently on with the beautifying process, the while my mind was busy following out speculations of its own.

"When you have finished," said Lady Ormaroyd, suddenly, "I shall lie down and rest till dinner-time. The *tableaux* commence at ten o'clock."

"The hour when I go to bed," said I, smiling. "Is it any wonder that Society women lose their looks, their freshness, their youth, living such lives as they do! No human frame could stand it."

"Oh, well, there are always 'Cures' and 'Bads' and health resorts, and nerve specialists to put one right," said Lady Ormaroyd. "And we have ever so many pick-me-ups and tonics—leave alone electric batteries and electric massage. By-the-way, you ought to go in for that, Madame Beaudalet. It is quite the latest thing. I've tried it at Hesperia's. She's in Sloane Street, you know. She has a wonderful place, all fitted up with batteries and engines; and you get the high frequency current—

or the static treatment—or electric baths. Really marvellous!—and all women. She—Madame Hesperia—told me she went to Paris for a year to learn the method. They would not permit her to learn in England. She is a perfect enthusiast on electricity. According to her it is the vital force of life—health—beauty—genius! If one only submits to be brain-electrified one can do anything. Conquer any difficulty; achieve any ambition; perform any mental feat. But it's a rather terrifying process. I confess I hadn't courage to risk it. Besides, what's the use of genius—to a woman. It only makes her peculiar, and gets her disliked. A little flippant cleverness is all we want."

I felt interested in Madame Hesperia, as I had also studied electricity in Paris. I asked for her address. There might be advantage in studying electrical massage. Having once embarked on the profession of beauty culture, I meant to carry it on thoroughly. Lady Ormaroyd gave it me at once.

"And if you go, *do* tell me if you think there's anything in it—or if it's only another 'fraud,'" she said. "Somehow I feel I can trust *you*. It's paying you a great compliment, because I never have put any faith in your profession or its exponents."

"And yet you go to them?"

"Oh! That's just the way with women! We try a thing for an experiment, or because all the other women we know are trying it, and then we find we must go on. It's like drug-taking. You think you can leave off when you like—but you can't. So with beautifying. You try one thing, and then another; and one person, and then another person; and always you are hoping that the last remedy, or the last nostrum will do the trick for you. And so you drift on and on, always expecting and always being disappointed—yet unable to drag yourself from the fatal fascination of experiments."

"*You are very candid,*" I said.

"Well," she answered, laughing, "I see no use in being anything else. Of course, you may be thinking that you will only share the fate of others long discarded. But that rests with yourself. If I am satisfied with what you do I shall not forsake you or your methods."

"Look," I said, and held up the hand-mirror before her.

She gave a little eager cry. "Why! . . . But really Madame Beaufort, this is wonderful! What *have* you done. I look—positively, I look thirty—and good at that—and yet I'm a grandmother!"

"You certainly don't look more than thirty-five," I said.

"But will it last? That's my terror always."

"It lasted on the last occasion, so you said."

"Yes, I looked almost as well when I came home as when I left, except for my eyes."

"I cannot help you there," I said. "The eyes show fatigue and pain more surely than any other member of the body. Understand, Lady Ormaroyd, that art, however admirable, cannot compare with Nature. In the whole pharmacopœia of beauty there is but one magic charm—and that is youth."

She sighed faintly. "You are right. Of course, you are right. Well, I must be thankful to look as well as I do. When I am *en grande toilette*—gown and jewels, and all the rest of it, I shall pass muster very creditably."

"Indeed, you will," I said. "If I had not your word that you are a grandmother, I should never dream you were over thirty-five."

"Candidly, I am fifty-seven," she said. "Old enough, I suppose, to have done with vanity and nonsense of this sort. Gwen—she is my daughter—is always preaching to me to give it up and be natural. But, as I tell her, to be natural, now-a-days, only means that you look a dowd or a fright. We *must* 'do ourselves up.' We must have our 'transformations' and our face washes, and our rouge, and our powder, and all the rest of it. I believe there is a class



of women who look upon this sort of thing as a positive sin. But they don't belong to our set. And as for 'good' women, I've known a Bishop's wife who wore a wig and painted her face like any Piccadilly *cocotte*. But perhaps she modelled herself on Biblical characters. It makes them seem so human and so like ourselves when one hears they 'tired their heads' and painted their faces, just as we do!"

She rose and again surveyed herself, at all angles, and in various positions. "Really, I *am* grateful," she said, "and after a rest and a light dinner (I never eat a heavy meal when I'm going out anywhere) I'm sure I shall be as 'fit' as Dickey herself. By the way, *does* she do anything? Not just a little—a very little?"

"No. I think not. She has a lovely skin, and she seems very careful of it. I only massaged her with that same cream I use for you."

"It is marvellous stuff. You should cherish that recipe, Madame Beaudelet. It will make your fortune. Only take care the secret does not leak out. Who prepares your things?"

"A French chemist, whom I can trust," I said, as I put away my pots and bottles and essences carefully.

"That's fortunate," she said. "I was going to tell you——"

She hesitated—then laughed. "Well, why shouldn't I? One of the best known and best advertised members of your profession found out where a rival beautifier had her preparations made up. She bribed the chemist to give her the secret of one special wash. Unfortunately, he gave it as *he* knew it. But madame herself kept always back one ingredient, which she alone added. Result—the fluid, when applied, only blistered the patient's skin, and proved so injurious that there was a 'show up,' and she had to bolt, leaving the field open to her rival."

"That sort of thing would be quite possible," I said. "But I *think* I have taken due precautions. One special

preparation of mine has yet to be completed. It is formulated from a genuine *de l'Enclos* recipe. I have great expectations regarding it. Of one thing I am quite certain, no one in the whole profession, either in London, or Paris, or Vienna, has anything approaching it for efficacy!"

Her eyes grew eager. "Really? and when do you expect it?"

"Not for another week. I had to send to Paris for one of the ingredients, and that takes time."

"Then no one has tried it yet?"

"No. I must first convince myself that it is safe and beneficial."

"How conscientious you are, Madame Beaudelet!"

"No," I said. "Only prudent."

## VIII

I THOUGHT of those words as I went homewards in the chill gloom that had closed in upon the earlier sunshine of the December day. I had not far to walk, and I preferred exercise to the foetid atmosphere of 'buses. Cabs, even at shilling fares, I considered an extravagance under present circumstances.

"Conscientious," that was what Lady Ormaroyd had called a simple piece of honesty—an honesty safeguarded by the policy of my position. By the necessity of gaining a *safe* reputation before it should degenerate into a general one.

To my own mind the whole business was detestable. A thing of shams and artifice. I had not the slightest doubt but that in time I should become false as its falsehoods—artful as its artifices. That I should learn to flatter, and delude, and persuade all the silly, vain fools who came to me for advice, that I *could* benefit them. Could make them almost beautiful. Could renovate and re-juvenate faded skins, lack-lustre eyes, facial defects. That my half-guinea remedies were magical, and my guinea treatments a veritable dower of beauty.

Other people did all this and seemed to prosper. Other protestations and professions were lavishly advertised—and, to all appearances, believed. I must drift with the same current if I desired to be famous, or, as Lady Ormaroyd termed it, "to make my fortune."

But that word "conscientious" haunted me. It reminded *me of a period in my life when I had resolved to live honestly,*

and do what I imagined to be my duty as bravely as I might. That time of effort was happily over. Its disastrous results alone reminded me that to fight against fate is as useless as a child's endeavour to stop with a straw the current of a stream.

The current is Life. The straw is Human Effort. I laughed in secret bitterness as I reviewed past scenes. I told myself that never again would I err on the side of endeavour. Fate should find me passive and do as it willed with me.

The indescribable feeling of loneliness that had swept over me on that night of the fog came sweeping back again; here now, amidst brilliant lights and hurrying crowds. What mattered I to them, or they to each other. An accident, a disaster, a death would but affect a unit in this vast throng. The unit would be hustled aside to the hospital ward—the poor-house—the mortuary. But the lights would still shine on, and the throngs would hurry each to pleasure, or sin, or vice, as the fancy took them. Life went and life came in endless succession. The breath that blew out one of the myriad burning candles blew up the flame of another. Faint spark—flickering light—full blaze—then utter and outer darkness. And who cared? Was ever a single life so great, so valuable, so *needed*, that its extinction had meant universal loss?

Were not the ranks filled, the place supplied, the need responded to, almost as soon as the mourner's tears had dried; ere the "funeral baked meats" had grown cold. Here and there grief sat alone; here and there a true heart ached, and knew that desolation had at least individual meaning. But to the masses—to the world and its vastness, the loss of one life was but as the withdrawing of one drop of water from the ocean's immensity; as the subtraction of one grain of corn from a field of ripened acres.

And it was this feeling, this conviction, that made up the larger portion of my creed of existence.

It was a creed taught, and accepted, and believed, by most of the men and women who had meant Paris and life for me. Dr. Jules Gautier himself was an ardent materialist. When I had asked to what end he worked so hard, and endured so much, he had said it was for the sake of those who should come after. That the race was bound to perpetuate itself; that each generation, worked for the generation yet to be. But for the Law of Necessity—the law that forced them to plough in the field of Endeavour, and waste life's stores of energy in research—for this law he had no adequate explanation.

It was there, as the earth and the sky and the ocean were there. Why? Well—a shrug of the shoulders answered only—Why? If one strove and struggled and fought till every bodily and mental faculty were exhausted, the answer would never be found. That vague, vast necessity was there. Life's stern and cruel taskmaster. But the wherefore of its place in the scheme of Creation was not to be learnt or understood of the beings created.

Engrossed by such thoughts and speculations, I suddenly found I had taken a wrong turning. I was not in my own street, but in that narrow *cul-de-sac* where the red lamp of Monsieur Thibaud showed like a beacon of hope.

The sight of it reminded me of him. I thought I would look in and enquire as to how long it would be ere my *de l'Enclos* recipe would be ready. I pushed open the door. No one stood behind the counter, or was visible through the half-glass door leading to the inner room.

After waiting for a moment I advanced to the "*petit salon*," as the little Frenchman called it. The gas was lit. There was no fire in the little rusty grate. An air of desolation and neglect brooded over the comfortless place. It seemed to me to emphasize the loneliness and pathos of its owner's life.

As I stood looking at it all a voice, peevish and querulous, *called suddenly down the stairs*: "Is anyone there?"

I crossed the room and looked up the narrow, dark staircase.

"Yes," I announced. "I want to see Monsieur Thibaud. Is he in?"

"No. He won't be in for a quarter of an hour. You must call again."

I stood there hesitating. "Are you Mademoiselle Thibaud," I called out, "Mademoiselle Julie?"

"How do you know my name? Who are you?"

"May I come up and see you? I have heard from your father that you are not quite well—or strong. I should like to sit with you a little while—if I may?"

There was an interval of silence. Then the querulous voice sounded again. "Oh! Come up if you like——"

I ran up the little narrow stairs. They ended on a landing covered with a strip of brilliant druggetting.

Through a half-open door streamed the light of a bright fire. Sitting, or rather lying, on a long cane extending-chair, was a girl, with a sickly, white face, strange dark eyes, and an untidy mass of dark hair. A pile of cushions were behind her. A Bellagio rug of brilliant colouring was thrown over her knees. The room itself looked an epitome of comfort, in startling contrast to the rest of the house. The bed stood in a corner, and was draped, French fashion, with gay cretonne curtains. Beside the girl's chair stood a small walnut-wood table, on which was a bowl of chrysanthemums, and various books and illustrated journals. The comfort, and almost luxury, around her surprised me, knowing as I did her father's impoverished circumstances.

A jet of flame shot suddenly up from the coals. It showed me her face peering curiously up at mine. Her large eyes had an expectant, almost frightened look.

I addressed her frankly. I told her of my acquaintance with her father and my business with him. She answered with a vague listlessness, as if such matters were apart from any interest of her life.

I tried to get her to speak of herself. I asked what was her malady?

She gave a pettish rejoinder. How should she know? That was the doctor's business. They said it was a nervous breakdown. She had never been strong. She had had to work, and work had almost killed her. Now—she didn't care what happened. One of the Sisters from the Nazareth House near by came daily to attend to her, and prepared the invalid food she was ordered. For the rest, she lay there alone for hours.

"Don't you ever go out?" I enquired.

"Very seldom. I hate a chair, and that is the only way I can get about."

"It is very sad to be ill when one is young, as you are," I said. "But you must hope for better days. Surely, if you have no radical disease, a cure should be possible."

She drew the rug about her, and shivered. An expression of uneasiness crept again into her eyes.

"I—I don't know," she said vaguely. "We are poor, and the doctors know that, and don't care about trying to cure me. One of them said I ought to lead a more active life; not lie down as I do; but walk! I—walk!" Again she shivered. "As if I could. All exertion is horrible to me—it sets my nerves ajar."

I laid one ungloved hand on her own thin, feverish hand, as it lay on the rug. She started violently.

"Why! How nervous you are!" I said. "I was wondering if massage would do you any good. I have seen many sorts of nerve disorders at the hospital where I worked. Sometimes massage or electricity quite cured them."

She sighed wearily. "I don't believe in cures. I don't believe in anything. I shall never get better. I don't wish to get better. What has life to offer me? Drudgery—hard work, and a mere pittance as wages for it! I'm not *good-looking like some girls* or I'd go on the stage or the

Music Halls. I hate men. The sort of men girls in my position meet. Bar-loafers—seedy clerks—counter-jumpers! The vulgar, slangy, Bank-holiday crew, who imagine a girl is honoured if they address her in the street, or ask her to go walking with them on Sunday! A friend of mine——”

She stopped abruptly. “Do you mind sitting in this sort of light. I’ll light the gas, if you wish. It’s close at hand.”

She pointed to an extending bracket that could be drawn forward and lit from her position on the chair. It seemed to me that her comfort and convenience had been studied in every way.

“Oh! I like this half-light,” I said. Don’t trouble to alter it for me.”

She nestled back again into the cushions. “I was going to tell you about my friend. She was in the same office with me. She has left it and gone on the stage. A chorus girl. She comes now and then to see me.”

She broke off, and gave a stifled yawn.

“You are tired?” I said. “Perhaps you’ve talked too much. Would you like to be alone? Perhaps you could sleep?”

She clutched my arm violently.

“Sleep? That’s a blessing I seldom know. My nights are hateful. Wide awake I lie here, listening to the sounds in the street, feeling only the most horrible depression—the most utter misery; and then my dreams——”

She shuddered again. “They are too awful to speak of. And when morning comes everything seems to jar and irritate me. The milk carts, the postman’s knock all down the street, the opening of the shop—they are so many nerve-horrors I have to endure. Do you wonder I wish I was dead! That each morning I open my eyes I pray it is for the last time!”

“But this is dreadful!” I exclaimed. “It is morbid debility—sheer morbid debility, brought on by failure of



nerve-power. What can have caused it in the first instance?"

She gave me a quick, furtive look. The look—so it seemed to me—of a frightened child who has something to conceal, and is afraid of discovery. "I was never strong," she muttered, irritably. "And I was brought up like a lady, and then turned out to work. My father—ah! there he comes. I hear his step."

Monsieur Thibaud appeared in the doorway, treading softly and cautiously, as one who fears to intrude.

"Art thou awake, *ma petite*?" he asked tenderly.

I rose to my feet.

"I have been paying your daughter a visit, Monsieur Thibaud," I said. "As you were not in the shop I took the liberty of waiting for you here——"

"Ah, madame, it is then you? You are too good so to trouble yourself. I am certain it has made to my poor child a great pleasure. But why then this darkness, Julie? It is not possible that you and madame here make the acquaintance in such a gloom obscure?"

"Oh! I like this half-light," I said. "And your daughter's eyes are not very strong, she tells me; so I begged her not to light the gas."

"Her eyes—not strong!" He spoke jerkily and uneasily. "But what has't thou then, *chère p'tite ange*? I have heard nothing of this before."

"Oh! don't worry me, father!" exclaimed the girl, pettishly. "What does it matter? Eyes, or head, or hands, or feet—I suffer in them all! There—then, trouble not yourself. Madame has called on business—attend to her."

So sharp, so querulous were the daughter's tones, in comparison with the father's tender and anxious voice, that I was conscious of a feeling of indignation.

I remembered how he had spoken of her. I noted his *love and his care* in every arrangement made for her

comfort. I guessed only too well at the sacrifices entailed by this chronic invalidism. Was his reward merely indifference and ingratitude?

Without making any answer he crossed to the other side of the chair and lit the gas. It shone through a rosy globe and made the room seem brighter and prettier than before. Still silently, he opened a paper bag he had been carrying, and took out a bunch of purple grapes. He laid them on a plate beside her, and then turned to me.

"I am at the service of madame," he said gently; "shall we descend?"

I rose at once, and held out my hand to the fretful invalid. "Good night," I said. "I hope you will permit me to call again; and if you like books——"

She shook her head. "They tire me, and they hurt my eyes. But come certainly, if you wish—I get sick to death of my own company sometimes."

She scarcely touched my hand with her thin, hot fingers. To her father she said nothing. I followed him to the door and across the narrow landing. As we reached the stair-head the gas in the girl's room was suddenly extinguished.

## IX

I PUT my questions to Monsieur Thibaud. I saw he was perturbed and ill at ease. He told me nothing had yet arrived from Paris. It might be two—three days—or even a week.

I gave him a few instructions as to other preparations, and then wished him good evening. He followed me to the shop. He opened the door.

"Madame—" he said, and then checked himself, and searched my face with anxious eyes. "Madame, what is then your opinion of my poor child?"

"Candidly, Monsieur Thibaud," I said—"I think there is nothing the matter at all. It is a pure case of the *malade imaginaire*. She is hysterical, neurotic, but not physically ill. If she could be roused or interested in anything, she would soon be all right. Have you any idea what brought about this condition?"

"No, madame, I cannot say. I cannot suggest any cause. She was once of a time so *gaie*, so bright, so happy. Then it all departs. It comes not again. It is from that time of the typewriting at the office of the Strand. Perhaps it is the work, or the friends she makes, or the little—what you call romance of the heart—that to a young girl arrives. I know not; she says nothing. I am not of her confidence."

"But she has a friend. A girl who was with her in the same office. Could she not throw some light on this mysterious seizure?"

"Madame!" he exclaimed, sternly. "I like not that *friend*. I could wish that Julie was of her unknown. For

she is not what you call—*de classe*. Neither is she a good girl. Ah, *la, la!* But how it is sad, this martyrdom of the young virginal lives; these base uses of the profession of the stage and the music-hall. But so it arrives for the girl who is pretty, who has the talent, who seeks the fame! Always—always it is thus. And the great theatres? What are they but the great vile harems where is caught and fettered the once so free and beautiful life. Ah, madame! what I hear, what I know! What they come here and seek of my hands, because this is a *pharmacie Française*. And my Julie, my angel, she has no mother. And what can a man—even if he be a father who adores—what can he say of warning that may not also affright the delicacy, the pure instincts of the young girl. And the Sister, when I ask of her, she says: “Ah, Monsieur, it is not what you fear; it is something altogether different. Ask you of her friend.”

“And have you asked this friend?” I said.

“Madame—how can I? She come here bright, beautiful; dressed to the height of the knocker, as you say. She come one or two times in the automobile of a *jeune monsieur!* She pass me as of no account—as the dirt of the street. And Julie loves her. Julie is always happy—pleased—excited when she pays her the visit. I cannot say to her, ‘Come not here. I desire not to see your gowns of Bond Street, and the automobile of your friend the *jeune monsieur.*’ It would offend Julie. She would be angered. She would take more and more away her love; and, oh! madame, it is her love that makes my star of life. Without my child, there would be no meaning of life at all for me.”

I was silent. I seemed to be looking down into the depths of a suffering human heart. I seemed to see the pulse of pain throbbing under the exposed nerves. Love like this was new to me. It had never come into my life. Perhaps, if it had——

His voice broke the stillness. “Pardon me, madame, that I go to trouble you with my poor affairs. It is the

fault of you, who are so kind, so *sympathique*. But one must only have patience. *Le bon Dieu*, He knows how much we are able to suffer. More—He gives not to us."

I wished him good-night, and went back to my flat, and the good offices of Barbe Piccotée, which meant clear soup and chicken *fricassée*; a comfortable tea-gown laid ready for me, a bright fire, and the evening newspapers. "Truly, I have no call to be ungrateful," I said to myself. "Think of that wretched girl; that patient, loving old father. Think of all the fret and fever and rivalry going on to-night where Society meets—where vanity and selfishness play their petty parts! Am I not better off away from it all. Assuredly, comfort and peace are the best things in life. The day's ill, or the day's good, should be sufficient boundary for one's mental horizon. Why look beyond the immediate "All's well" that is our's, for the possible ill that *may* be hovering afar off."

So, I sat in my cosy chair, and sipped Barbe's delicious coffee, and read of war news and a political crisis, and the doings of the the smart world, and the great world, and smiled at the familiar look of names that personal Press paragraphing had made common property.

I knew at what hour the Countess of Ripley's famous *tableaux* were to commence. I learnt what prominent leaders of Society happened to be in town and were expected to be present. I read of specially favoured journals who had been permitted to photograph certain of the *tableaux* for the benefit of their respective readers. And in and out of the frivolity and senselessness of society chatter ran ever the thread of pain and woe and disaster. The appeal of hospitals. The plaint of starving multitudes; the never-ceasing cry of misery from the East, what time the West gowned and jewelled itself, and squandered thousands on senseless entertainments, and spent on a single restaurant dinner what would have kept a working man's *family in comfort for a month!*

It was all very odd and very distressing ; and it was all so impossible to alter. Ruthlessly the Great Wheel turned. Helplessly the myriads of created beings turned with it. Tortured, struggling, crushed, maimed, bewildered, as the fighting *animalculæ* seen in a drop of water through a microscope.

"If Heaven has its celestial microscope," thought I, "So must we of earth look beneath its revelations ; a humiliating spectacle, and yet——"

The sharp "ting" of the door-bell startled me. I glanced at the clock. It was on the stroke of ten.

Who could it be at this time ? I went to the window and looked out. In the street below stood a small brougham and pair of horses. The carriage lamps flashed across the pavement. Two men in livery sat on the box. I turned as the door of my little *salon* was thrown open.

To my astonishment I faced Lady Judith Vanderbyl.

Barbe Piccotée announced her, and then closed the door.

She came forward. "How comfortable you look ! I almost envy you. So this is your home life. Where you sit *en petit comité* with yourself. Ought I to apologize for intruding at such an hour ? If so, say so frankly."

I felt a little bewildered. I drew another chair forward, and asked her to be seated.

She hesitated a moment. "The truth is——" she began, Then again she glanced round.

"Well, I have come to talk business with you. A—a chance—an opportunity has fallen in my way to-night, and I thought of you immediately. There is no reason *why* I should wish to favour you above others of your profession——"

Again she broke off, and began to unfasten the beautiful sable cloak about her shoulders—"Frankly, can you give me an hour to discuss a project with you. To-morrow will be too late ; and, *as I said*, it is a chance—a good one."

"Certainly," I said, "I have nothing to do. I shall be delighted."

"Will you call your maid, and tell her to send away the carriage. It can return in an hour."

She threw off her cloak. She was in a dinner dress of transparent black, glittering with steel and sequins. Round her throat was a diamond collar. Other jewels sparkled on her bodice, her arms, her ungloved hands.

I gave Barbe Piccotée the order, and told her to bring some fresh coffee.

My strange visitor threw herself into a chair, and took out a cigarette from a gold case hanging at her waist.

"You don't mind?"—she questioned.

"Not at all," I said. "In fact, I will join you."

"That's right. I was afraid you had no feminine vices! After all, they are very humanizing."

I laughed, and lit one of my favourite Turkish brand. Then I offered her coffee.

"I am sorry I have nothing else. But I seldom touch wine or liqueurs, or any sort of stimulant."

"Umph! Then you are minus *one* very glaring feminine vice. That accounts for your good skin and your clear eyes. Do you know, your eyes are wonderful? Just like a child's. You might be sixteen. I suppose you are nearer twenty-six?"

"Twenty-seven," I said.

She was looking at me with her own keen eyes, as if taking stock of all my points—good, bad, or indifferent.

"Well," she said, suddenly. "Let us get to business. You are summing me up 'eccentric,' no doubt. I suppose I am. For instance"—she glanced at the clock—"I might now be amongst all the notable and smart people at Lady Ripley's; and, instead, I am here to talk business with you. But, candidly, business appeals to me more than pleasure. I don't want to waste my time and waste my money for *no apparent object*. Also—I like you, Madame Beaufort."

I don't know why I should, but I do. I think you are honest. I think you would walk a straight path sooner than a crooked one. Most women profess to tread the straight, and are perpetually straying off into by-ways and side issues, and telling you they have confused the directions!"

She blew a puff of cigarette smoke ceilingwards and then sipped her coffee. "Delicious! One does not often taste the like out of Paris . . . But I am keeping you in suspense. Tell me—you are quite determined to go on with this profession of yours? I think you object to the term beauty-doctor, but that's what we call it?"

"Determined?" I echoed. "Of course, now that I have made a start, I must continue. There is nothing else for me to do."

She nodded her queer, rusty old head. The glitter of the diamonds at her throat and bosom seemed to accentuate her ugliness and her age.

"That is what I want to know. Well—you have begun wrongly. You are too modest. You are not convincing enough—bold enough. People won't come to you *here* in this unfashionable place, except just out of curiosity, at first. They will think you can't be very wonderful unless you have suitable and expensive surroundings."

"I would have them if I could afford them," I said bluntly.

"I am glad to hear that. 'Small beginnings and great ends' sounds very well as a copy-book maxim, but believe me, it's not a maxim to work on now-a-days. Better the big beginning, the big splash, even if they have to be bolstered up with borrowed capital. What capital have you?"

Again I laughed.

"Behold, my stock-in-trade," I said, waving my hand towards the rooms, "and in the bank to my credit, two hundred pounds."

"*That is really all?*"



"All. A week ago I was very hopeless. I am not sure that the river didn't possess a certain temptation. Now——"

"I know what you mean. You have some half-dozen—are they as many?—well, let us say half-dozen customers. They may send you half-a-dozen more. It is not unlikely. Even then it will take a long time to get known to make a name. Can you afford to wait? Are you patient by nature? Judging from your face I should say not. But you know best."

"I am not at all patient," I said.

"Well then, supposing I told you I had it in my power to set you up properly? To make you at once notable and noted. What would you say?"

"I should naturally ask your reason—or your price," I answered, colouring hotly.

She nodded. "Exactly. And if I said, because—I—desired it. Because amongst all the tricksters and frauds you at least seemed honest? What then?"

I laughed, and threw away my cigarette. "Dear Lady Judith," I said, "I assure you I am in no way more honest than any of the others. My art is all—art. I can paint and make up anyone who permits it. I can make them *look* almost beautiful under certain conditions. But, so can the others. I can give no woman what Nature has not given her. No more can they. I can preserve a good skin. I can make it look fresh and clear and healthy, but I can't do that for a bad one. No one can—not Bond Street, or Paris with all their *sachets de beauté*, and their other advertised nostrums! I make no pretence of 'restoring' or 'effacing.' I only hide by artifice what age, or illness, or nature has rendered unsightly. Of course, I do not *say* this to my clients. But you asked for frankness; I have been frank."

"Thank you," she said ironically; "I accept the compliment, and—I am not the least offended. God knows, we *women must be blind idiots*, if we can look in our mirrors

night and morning and *not* see what Time and Life mean for us! However, we are again drifting from the point To-night I had private information, that a certain firm of beauty specialists, trading under the name of Clochette & Co., are on the verge of bankruptcy. It is in my power to step in and buy the premises, and business, and stock-in-trade, for a few thousands. I resolved to ask you, if you would take it up. I, of course, advance the money, and pay myself out of the receipts, giving you a percentage the first year, and increasing the income with the takings. You might retain this flat to live in. For the other premises consist only of the necessary rooms. One is fitted up for electric treatment. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed, eagerly. "I began to study it in Paris."

"Well, you could go to Hesperia's, and learn her methods if you wish. What do you say to the scheme?"

"It seems too good to be true," I faltered. "It is most generous of you to offer me such a chance. Only—I am afraid—I mean—supposing it failed again."

"It will not fail," she said, calmly. "You shall become famous. I can make you so. This is not a matter of borrowing, and then being unable to pay. I take all risks. In fact I run the place, with you as manager, and only your name will appear. The better you succeed, the wealthier you will become. You won't be the first——"

She paused abruptly, and then lit another cigarette.

"I have been perfectly candid. There is absolutely no risk. The only difference will be that it is not your business, or your venture. I can send people to you—or you to them—who would not dream of employing you under your present circumstances. You will be as famous as——"

She mentioned another famous specialist whom I had secretly envied, and whose income ran into thousands.

I sat there with clasped hands, looking from her strange, ugly face into the fire—and back again to her face. She

seemed to dominate me by her personality ; to force me into an acknowledgment of the futility of my individual achievements ; and yet far back in my mind lay a latent distrust of her motives. Why should she do this for me. What was I to her more than any other of my profession, that she should seek me out and make me so generous an offer ?

She made a sudden, impatient movement. " Well ! Is it so hard to decide. Or have I not made myself sufficiently clear ? Perhaps you think you won't be so free—is that it ? "

I shook my head. " No one is free who works for a livelihood. Circumstance is our taskmaster, and Chance our only friend. My hopes—— "

" Why don't you say your ambitions ? "

" Because they hardly merit such a title. I know well enough that there is nothing good, or great, or elevating in such a career. I adopted it of necessity, but I am not blind to its meaning. "

" There are many meanings—more than you know or dream of yet, " she said. " And all of them tend to—barter. " She laughed harshly. " But look at the clock. The time is nearly up. Can't you arrive at a decision ? "

I recapitulated what she had said. She eyed me silently the while—then nodded.

" You have a good memory. Yes. That is how the matter stands. The risk is mine ; the profit yours—— "

" And your reasons ? " I asked suddenly.

" Can you not credit me with pure philanthropy ? Have I not said I liked you. I think you are honest. I—I should like to do you a service if possible. As for obligation—put that out of your head. Remember there are a dozen women to whom I could submit this offer who would jump at it. I have only till to-morrow to decide, or the place will be bought over my head. Do you accept or not ? "

She rose. Her lovely, glittering gown spread around her, and over the rug, and to my feet. Her keen eyes were *on my face*, drawing consent from my hesitating lips.

"Yes, Lady Judith. I accept—most gratefully."

She drew a long, deep breath.

"Thank you," she said.

I rose also, and looked at her in surprise. "It is I who should thank *you*. The obligation is all on my side."

"How do you know?"

We stood facing each other silently. I felt that she wished her influence to be the dominating one, and yet that in some indescribable way I baffled her desire.

She turned, and took her cloak from the back of the chair where she had thrown it.

"I will see you to-morrow," she said. "When I have arranged for the transfer of the premises. About mid-day. Shall you be free?"

I crossed the room to the bureau and took out my engagement book.

"Two people are coming at half-past ten," I said, "Madame de Montserrat, and her friend, Mrs. Audley. That means an hour and a half."

"Very well, I'll say half-past twelve. Will you ring and ask if my carriage is here?"

I summoned Barbe Piccotée, who had considerably stayed up long after her usual bedtime. She announced that the carriage was waiting.

Lady Judith gathered up her trailing skirts with her left hand. She held out her right to me.

"Good night!" she said. "And good luck to our enterprise."

I felt the warm colour rush to my face. It was the first time that a client had offered to shake hands with me.

I could only return her good-night in an embarrassed, nervous fashion. I could only stand there watching her disappear through the doorway that led to the lift; then as the door closed, I went back to the room and stood looking at the chair where she had sat, and the cigarette ends she had smoked.

I tried to recall her words. I asked myself again, "Why had she offered to do all this for me? Was there a hidden purpose behind it? Was her apparent philanthropy a disguise for some strange or subtle scheme, in which I was to appear as the principal agent? Were the rumours about her correct, and did she really deserve the sobriquet of "Queer Lady Judas?"

## X

FINDING no answer to these perplexing questions, I went to bed. But I was far too excited and disturbed for sleep.

Again and again did I pursue Lady Judith's scheme and Lady Judith's motives, through various imaginary channels. Again ask myself could it be really true that the morrow would see me ostensible possessor of fashionable premises—a flourishing business—and all without risk or expenditure on my own part.

Such luck had befallen other women I knew. But in their case the "good fairy" had usually been of the male persuasion; and the bargain had had conditions attached to it. How was it that Fate had singled me out for so exceptional an experience?

Thus I questioned and argued and puzzled till the first early hours of day struck from Big Ben's sonorous throat. Then at last I fell asleep, and only awoke at Barbe Piccotée's summons and my early cup of tea.

I started up. I rubbed my eyes and looked round my tiny bedroom, and wondered had I had a queerly vivid dream, or had something really happened.

Bit by bit the puzzle set itself together once again.

I was to enter upon my business under new auspices. With all the prestige of wealth and success, with everything as I had wished and desired it to be, yet had known I could not possibly afford.

A sudden wave of triumph swept over my heart. What luck it was—my pleasing Lady Judas, and interesting her! *How glorious was the thought that I should ascend to the*

pinnacle of success with scarce an effort. That suspense and anxiety were over, and I might get some enjoyment and some benefit out of life at last.

When I got into my working dress of blue linen, and tied the muslin sleeves over my arms, and put on the dainty goffered muslin apron, that was a tribute to Barbe's skill as *blanchisseuse de fin*, I felt both pride and satisfaction in my appearance.

Freshness and cleanliness were the key-notes to all that meant my work, my personality, and my surroundings. They were all the stock-in-trade I could bring to my new and important establishment. But I had noticed they were valuable assets in the eyes of my customers. "They are worth transference," I said to myself, as I waited for Madame de Montserrat and her friend.

They arrived somewhat late. My first glance showed that their faces were excited, flushed, brimful of some news or scandal that they were dying to discuss.

"Go on, Julie—finish the story," exclaimed Mrs. Audley, as she seated herself before the mirror. "I'm sure Madame Beaufort won't mind. Perhaps you've heard? Oh, no! you couldn't. But you know of the *tableaux* that were to be given at Ripley House last night, don't you?"

"Certainly. I heard of them from all sources."

"I was not there; but Madame de Montserrat was. And as we drove home she was telling me about them, or rather about *one*. It will be the talk of all London to-day. I only wish it would get into the papers, but no reporters were there. Are you interested enough in our famous society *demirep*, Lady 'Rip,' to listen to her latest escapade?"

"Oh *ma chère*," exclaimed Madame de Montserrat.

"Moderate then thy expressions, I entreat thee."

"I only call her what every club-man, and everyone of her 'set' call her," replied Mrs. Audley. "Heaven knows I'm *no* saint, but I *do* draw the line at openly defying all *canons of decency*. She glories in outraging them on every

possible occasion. It was bad enough when she and her men friends came home from Newmarket in a special train—all blind drunk—and so rowdy that the very guard had to remonstrate with them. But even that—though it got into the papers—was a mild outbreak in comparison with this!”

“Figure to yourself then, madame”—interposed Madame de Montserrat—“that these much talked of and so wonderful *tableaux* are indeed all that is beautiful and *artistique*. But there comes one that has—so far—not been seen. Of which one has only whispered. What anxiety, what curiosity is there not—among all this so great and notable assemblage! There is present one royal personage of the *haute noblesse*, who waits on at London for this entertainment only. He is—so one says—a special friend of Miladi Ripley. Well, at last it arrives—the *tableau*. It is of the last on the programme. I have it here. It is a *bétise, n'est-ce-pas?*”

She produced it. “‘Venus and Adonis,’” she read out, “‘of the Twentieth Century.’ Mon Dieu—but it was of the most daring—the most indescribable. Behold, then! Adonis—he is a representative of your modern Hercules, the great, strong, handsome Monsieur Sandow. He—Adonis, was also big—strong; of a muscle and knobliness *extraordinaire*! He stand on a *piédestal*—framed by one great, massive *encirclement*, as one frames a picture, and there kneels at his feet, the so beautiful, but not too modest Countess of Ripley—as Venus.”

“As Venus—simply, and without disguise,” interrupted Mrs. Audley. “Venus, naked and unashamed, at the feet of Society’s newly-elected god of strength! Venus adoring—or supplicating? The audience were left to draw their own conclusions.”

“And they did,” said the little Frenchwoman. “*Ciel!* But how they laugh—how they whisper. How they clap the hands. And the curtain it goes up—one, two, three times!”



"It was such a novel idea," sneered Mrs. Audley. "Ancient art interpreted by modern impudence!"

"But it was also very shocking," murmured Madame de Montserrat. "And it made not to end with the fall of the curtain. There is one little *histoire scandaleuse* that comes after. I wait to tell it until we arrive here."

"Well—go on; tell it now!" exclaimed her friend, impatiently.

"The room it is all of darkness each time that the *tableau* is *encored*, and after the last time it is not lighted—what you say—all at once. A few moments pass. *Nous attendons en silence*. Then—there is the stir and the confusion of to leave our seats, and make to the supper room. How we talk. *Mon Dieu*, but how there is a Babel! And one says to me, 'Where then is Monsieur le Prince? Look you he is not here.' And another says, 'Regard you also, monsieur *le mari*,' he has departed himself. And so one puts the two of the two together, and there is presently a great stir and scandal. For one of the other *tableau* ladies she come to join us, and she say, 'Crikey! But there is the row *royale* in the dressing-room of Madame la Comtesse.' So we gather to her and say, 'What then has arrived? Tell us——' and she laugh, *mais*, how she laugh! And why, think you? . . . It has chanced that Monsieur le Prince, he is so angry, he departs to the dressing-room of the so beautiful Venus—to remonstrate against her. And there comes, almost 'of his heels,' as you say, monsieur *le mari*! Figure then to yourselves what another *tableau* it goes to make! No one speaks of anything else. And we wonder—we ask of ourselves, 'Does Miladi then appear again *ce soir*, and it is some long time, and we make ourselves the good supper, and drink the champagne of Pierrefond et Cie, and, are all so *gai*, so *joyeux*, when at last there she is amongst us one time more, and so beautiful—and robed in a gown of the so-famous Judas herself—that makes of us nothing but the eyes and the envy.

"Who says now a word that is indiscreet? Not anybody. *Ma foi, non!* We think only but how she is lovely, and how that all too exquisite gown seems just the robe for her all so exquisite beauty. And does anyone ask for monsieur *le mari*? I think not. Or for Monsieur le Prince? No, also. They have gone—they are effaced—one desires them not. And Miladi herself—she laugh, she talk, she say all the witty, wicked things, *les choses impossible*—and drinks the champagne, and makes the sport and the fun. And so it ends. And what we say to ourselves, *ce n'est rien de tout*, for she hears it not."

"And if she did she wouldn't care a d——n," remarked Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley, savagely.

I looked at the handsome face beneath my hands. At curling lips and frowning brow and crimson cheek. Little of beauty there, under the influence of evil feelings. I saw her right hand clench itself as if it longed to strike a blow—the fierce blow of a jealous woman. I thought of her story as told by Lady Judith. Of how she moved only on the outer rim of that magic circle—Society. How that clenched, fierce, hand could only grasp the fringe of those sweeping garments and *manteaux de cour* that passed by on their way to exclusive entertainments, to palace and *salon*, from which she was debarred. Yet they were sinners like herself. Only they had sinned with discretion. They had taken care to be on the right side of the door. They lived on with the men they hated and despised, sooner than call on the law for freedom, since such freedom would prove them *déclassé*; would cancel admission to Court and the great houses of the Select Few.

The famous Countess was a proof of this. Her name had been a synonym for scandal. "Blown upon" by the breath of the very "man in the street." Hinted at with more or less boldness by society scavengers of the Press. And—she was not yet ostracized.

She possessed such inimitable effrontery, such gay spirits, such an inexhaustible fund of invention, that her *faux pas* were condoned by her set, and, apparently, unknown to her husband.

He was a stolid, heavy, good-natured man; fond of country life, of sport, of yacht-racing. He let his lovely wife go her way, and he went his. So much everyone knew. So much I had learnt and deduced even in this short space. For my Lady Ripley had her *pied à terre* in Paris, and was well known, and well talked about. There also her name was no novelty to me, only her personality.

I went silently on with my business of massage, being anxious to finish the performance before Lady Judith should call. Madame de Montserrat was still chattering.

"What it comes to be popular! A woman she has a *garde d'attention* at all sides! No one dares to break it down. And she, too, has this *garde*—Miladi Ripley! She can be *grande dame*, when she so pleases, and she can of the other time, be all that is most vulgar, most scandalizing."

"Conjugating the verb *s'encanailler*," remarked Mrs. Audley, raising herself up to the level of the mirror. "Have you finished, Madame Beaufort?"

"Yes, madam," I answered, withdrawing the wrapper.

She changed places with her friend. The conversation still went on.

"After all," observed Madame de Montserrat, giving a long, scrutinising glance at her pretty *riante* face, "one must fall back (is that not how you say) on something besides one's looks, however charming they are. And much more is asked of a woman to-day save just beauty. She must have *esprit*, charm; talk the slang; flirt, coquette, play the games of men (some of them); smoke, drink, be always *bon camarade*, or it makes not popularity."

"God knows, we ought to be sick of our faces!" exclaimed Mrs. Audley. "The same eyes staring at us; the same *hair to brush*; the same skin to paint! I don't wonder so

many women make up! At least it breaks the monotony. How often I've wished I could chuck *myself* away, and be somebody else! They invent everything nowadays—why can't someone invent a new face to be taken on trial? We could test the blonde type once we were tired of brunette; and assure ourselves of the respective charms of dark or fair skin; blue or black eyes; red or brown or golden hair."

"The hair can be easily managed," I suggested.

"Oh! *that*, of course, but if the colour doesn't suit the face, what's the good? Heaps of women have done it, and made perfect guys of themselves. I know one who tried the henna dodge, and used to empty her powder-box on her face with an idea that it made her skin *fair*. Well, of all the objects—but no matter! We were taking about the art *s'encanailler*. The art of Comtesse Creusac and Countess Ripley. The art of women who can actually make their own husbands believe in them!"

"Madame de Montserrat laughed softly. "Life, the life of our world, would be all that is humiliating were it not capable of dissimulations."

"Certainly—marriage would," said Mrs. Audley. "The Greeks should have placed Hymen behind a closed door on which was inscribed: "All ye who are truthful, fear to enter in!"

"Marriage—it is not a bad institution," said her friend. "It is all the way in which one is brought up to consider it. Me—I was married straight from my convent to Alphonse. I knew of him nothing. I had not once been five minutes alone in his company. I saw him at dinner and I liked not the way he ate and drank, nor was it pleasant that he stared at me so strangely. There is that in the eyes of a man—of some men—is it not—that makes a girl's heart beat so quick, and go then so cold and sick, we know not why?"

"Perhaps that's as well," said Mrs. Audley, with a queer little smile. "I often think how wise our mothers and

governesses are to keep us ignorant. A girl can only theorise about herself and her own emotions before she is married, and man has all the charm and mystery of the unknown. But things are altogether different when she knows herself a married woman. She judges her nature no longer as her sole possession. She is complex: a dual personality. She may succeed in finding a key to her own mystery, but it is not a key to theories any longer. Only harsh, horrible facts to which she is bound, and which have been rendered intelligible by—results."

"But the young girl, the *ingénue* of comedy and fiction, she would be altogether too silly, too prudish, for real life," said Madame de Montserrat. "Look you—I too was of her—once. I cannot but recall how stupid, how tiresome, how impossible I then was. Figure to yourself, *ma chère*, that on *le jour de noce* I said to *maman*——"

By some inadvertence I threw over one of my pots of cream, and it fell on Madame de Montserrat's gown. She jumped up with an expression of fear, lest her toilette should be disarranged, or disfigured by the accident. Fortunately no harm was done. But she had lost the thread of her argument, and for some moments only chattered of the value of cosmetics, and the trouble of keeping one's skin and one's person *tout à fait* in the tiresome condition of beauty.

Her friend asked her if she would prefer to resemble a certain Lady Flashleigh, who, from description, appeared to be a notable sportswoman—a frequenter of every racecourse in the kingdom or out of it.

"Look at her skin! tough as a hide and coarse as sand-paper. And her hands, so large and red; and her feet that take sevens in boots. Yet she was a very handsome girl when she first came out."

"Ah! then, it is that she took to herself a sportsman husband," observed Madame Julie. "What would you? *She makes of herself* the sacrifice to please him. She

adopts the sport, the chase, the tennis, the fishing, the *boze*, that go to make muscles and strength. She is *tout a fait* of a health to be envied; a nerve that is not of itself conscious; but also she is strong, loud, coarse; of a physique to make one afraid."

"Yes, and with all that strength and nerve, and splendid constitution, she has no son; only two very ugly and sickly daughters! So one cannot assert that physique and athletics are altogether a physical success," continued Mrs. Audley. "Myself, I detest sport, except as an excuse for convenient country house visits."

"But thou hast no children, *chérie*?" observed her friend.

"Thank heavens—no! You know I can't endure them; except, of course, yours. They are little angels; but then you bring them up so admirably."

"It is a grief to me that I have no son," said the pretty little Frenchwoman. "It is of that the dissensions have sprung up between myself and Alphonse. Not that I care *that*"—(she snapped her fingers contemptuously) "for Alphonse! I, as you know, *chérie*, am an admirable French wife; also an admirable French mother. But—I had my lesson. Well, what would you? It is a lesson all wives have to learn. Some learn it with tears and cries; and some with reproaches and anger; and some again with patience; and others—with reprisals. In our life, in *la vie de monde*, romance has no place. Excitement, imagination, *les plaisirs des sens* make up a quite agreeable method of passing one's days. If monsieur *le mari* does not approve, he has the blame for himself. It is not always of the most wise to enlighten a woman; but a man he rests not *content* till he has done so; then he pleases not himself at results."

I ventured on a suggestion that French marriages were not more successful than English, regarded as marriage. I had reason to know, for my own worthy *mari* had not

been squeamish either as to confidence, or conduct, or enlightenment.

Madame de Montserrat evinced quick interest. "Yes, but take it then, madame, these ideas of you English. A freak, a sudden fancy; a passion born of a pretty face, the *svelte* charming figure that vales to your step. That is all! And straight it is arranged. It matters not that the girl so beautiful has no *dot*, for of that your English parent never thinks, and your English lover never heeds. It is for Heaven to arrange; all that. He of responsibility washes him the hands. What behold you then?"

She made a tragic gesture. "What, I ask, but the *ménage incroyable*. The big, full nursery of children; the poor down-trodden wife. The so always difficult task to make meet both ends, as your proverb says. *N'est ce pas?* And the girl so pretty of face, with the *svelte* and charming figure—does she dance now? *Ma foi; non!* She has not the time, nor the health, nor the money to robe herself as in those so charming days. It is always the pinch of the shoe; the ever-to-come *bébé*; the troubles of the *cuisine*, and the *domestiques*. *Dame!* but she has a *triste* lot, your English girl who marries herself for love. And as for your Society marriages, are they not always 'arranged,' as are ours of France? Your daily journals so call it! Rank, or wealth, or title of the one part; and *dot* or *convenance* on the other. And like we of Paris, *nous autres*, do not your aristocratic ladies conduct themselves and their *affaires* with a little pardonable indiscretion? And the *mari*, the once so stolid British husband, so family-virtuous, what of him? Does he not 'kick up the heel,' as your proverb says? Has he not, of occasion, a leaf taken out of his French neighbour's book, '*La joie de vivre?*' Consult your chronicles of divorce; your Society journals; it shall appear so, I think."

*She paused breathlessly.*

"Madame, you will have care of my *transformation*; it is of the new shape and difficult to well arrange."

I promised to be careful.

"I wonder you wear those things, Julie," said her friend.

"It is to save trouble, and to save my hair. It attempts not the so adorable *onduleuse*, that is to thee and thy *coiffure, chérie*. And the irons, I like them not; and the pin-wavers—Oh! they seem to me *tout à fait détestable*! Besides, one must establish them of the night time, and I—I like not to regard myself a fright for my own eyes, still less those of *monsieur, mon mari*."

"Oh—he! What does he signify?" laughed her friend. "I thought you had got over those ideas, Julie."

She made a quaint little grimace. "I say not that I have the sentiment, the poesy of a *grande passion*. But I would be *convenable*. I would not appear to him less attractive than—*les autres, par exemple!*"

"Are you not afraid he might fall in love with you a second time?"

Madame de Montserrat laughed like a child.

"He has not done that by way of a first time—yet. We are amiable. We are good friends—that is all. He amuses himself. For me I claim the equal freedom. I ask no question. He, too, is of a discretion to be admired. We stay here, or we stay there, or we of occasion rest *en campagne*. I find it a change of the most agreeable when I am tired of Paris or of London. I adore my two *petites*. They are so pretty; of a quaintness to delight one. They give me to feel good; to be glad. But also I make not more than *coquette* of myself, though I have the provocation. Ah, *chérie*, it is a good thing for us that Nature makes of us the mothers, to by way of compensate for all that men make us to suffer as the wives."

She lay back with closed eyes, and the faintest shadow of a smile just parting her curved lips. She looked so sweet,



so pure, so childlike herself, that I scarcely wondered at her friend's envious glance.

"I am amused at your theories, Julie. I am as sure that your children are only a setting of the domestic picture, when you choose to play at domesticity, as that no husband would ever have it in his power to make you suffer."

The dark eyes unclosed swiftly.

"You think I have not suffered—I?"

"I think you have soon found consolation—elsewhere."

"*Tais toi, ma chérie!* Thou wilt scandalize Madame Beaufort, who is all of the most discreet."

"Oh! don't mind me," I interposed. "I know what they are, these marriages of France, these love matches of England. However different the beginning, the end is almost always the same. One kisses; the other gives the cheek. One is content; the other grows restless. One keeps the vow, the other breaks it."

"Occasionally both break it," said Mrs. Audley, with that odd smile of hers which had meaning, yet no mirth.

"And also occasionally both keep it," said her friend.

"Frankly, madame, what is your opinion? In your life you must hear, see, observe a thousand of those so intimate details that make up the *vie de famille*, or one may say—the *ménage à deux*? Is it then a mistake this marrying? This giving oneself to a man as part of a household, a name, a reputation? In France, as you know, we of it make a partnership, but that comes of our rule of the *dot*; the bringing of the marriage portion; the some part of the indebtedness. Here you make that not so. It is a mistake, believe me. The wife has not the self-respect of her own part of the bargain. Oh! I know what you would say. Your Lord of Burleigh *bêtisement*, that she brings herself. It is not sufficient. It does not last, madame. The first what you call *tiffe*—row, quarrel—and it is all over! She is told that he has done all *this*, he has provided all *that*. She owes all *to him*, and thus for ever sinks her self-respect, her dignity

of mistress of a household unequalized. Oh! *la-la!* they have the faults very grave, these English marriages of romance."

"Don't you believe in romance—in love?" I asked her.

"*Believe* in love? but, yes! Of course I do. So must every woman. Only—it is best of itself—a thing apart from marriage. Is that not so—*ma chérie?*"

She looked up and met her friend's eyes in the glass. Mrs. Audley said nothing.

## XI

HALF-PAST TWELVE; a quarter to one; one o'clock; and no sign of Lady Judith. From anxiety, my mind turned to misgiving; to doubt; to fear. Had anything happened? Was the project to be a failure? My previous eagerness changed into passionate desire. The scheme looked so desirable, when instead of completion came non-fulfilment. Hour after hour drifted by. The dusk closed in, and the lamps were lit, and yet I waited and wondered, with no result. I was tired of pacing my little room—tired of scanning the news columns—tired of arranging and rearranging my *salle de toilette*.

Finally, I rang and bade Barbe Piccotée bring me some tea. Just as she closed the door the outer bell sounded sharply. I sprang to my feet all expectation. Barbe returned with a telegram in her hand. I tore it open, glancing first at the signature.

It was from Lady Judith.

*"Dine with me here seven-thirty."*

That was all, except the address in Eaton Square and the name.

"The boy, he attends an answer, madame," said Barbe Piccotée.

I started. I had forgotten her. An answer? I saw "reply paid," and the enclosed form, and wrote a hurried acceptance.

Then I sat down by the fire once more. I felt less worried. At least my strange client had not forgotten me. *But I wished there had been some hint of a successful*

issue. Everything was still vague, and my anxiety in no way lessened.

Barbe brought in the tea and lit the lamp, and enquired about dinner.

I told her I was going out to dine. It was the first time I had done so since we had come to London, and she was much fluttered.

It appeared then that madame was having a little pleasure once more? And the success that was also arriving—was it not? Every day more and more ladies seeking madame's advice and treatment. The lady, elderly and of the *embonpoint* so pronounced, she had greatly the interest of madame. She had paid so many visits; she but last night had been so affable, and presented to Barbe herself the *douceur* of a half-crown piece. But, yes. It was so. She only of all the ladies for whom the door had been answered or opened, she had thought of the poor *concierge* who opened it. Not that one was actually *concierge* here as in Paris—Paris the so beautiful and adorable. But madame knew what was meant.

"I am dining with that same lady, Barbe," said I.

"And why not?" asked Barbe. "If she were one *très grande dame*, with the *voiture particulière*, well, had not madame been the same, and possessed also the carriage of private use, and the men of the box so *comme-il-faut*? But, certainly, it was not at all surprising that the lady of the name unpronounceable had discovered the so great merits of madame, and that thus they marched to friendship—both the two; to friendship, and the success that should also arrive to madame with but a little patience."

I did not mention my hopes. I was afraid to dwell on their accomplishment. But I made her happy by telling her to get out one of my long unworn gowns. The choice should be her own, only let it be simple. I might chance to be the only *guest*.

I arrived at Lady Judith's just on the stroke of the half-hour. A footman took my cloak, and then led the way into a room at the end of the hall. Here I found Lady Judith sitting by a large business-looking writing table, covered with papers, letter clips, bill files—all the paraphernalia of an office. There was nothing feminine about the room. It was furnished simply and severely, just as a business man's study might have been. She herself wore a heavy tea-gown of deep violet velvet. She lifted her head and surveyed me with some surprise. Then rose and held out her hand.

"Why, how magnificent you are!" she exclaimed, "and only for one ugly old woman."

"It is a relic of other days," I said lightly. "And your telegram merely said 'dinner.' I was ignorant if there would be one guest or half-a-dozen."

"I rarely ask more than *one* when I like that one. However, you are a very pleasant subject for contemplation. I had no idea——"

She broke off. "Never mind. It would sound ridiculous. Now to put you out of suspense, or else you won't enjoy your dinner. It's all settled. I have bought the premises, or rather taken a lease of them. Paid the premium. Taken over the stock-in trade, and you may enter into possession as soon as you please."

I felt myself change colour. For a moment the relief was so great I could not speak. Then the tears rushed to my eyes. I held out my hands and grasped hers.

"I can't thank you as I wish," I stammered. "It seems almost incredible. All day I have been waiting—wondering; asking myself if I had not dreamt of our interview last night. Oh! Lady Judith——"

"*Chut!*" she said, sharply. "I want no thanks. I told you it was to be a matter of business. Here are the papers. You shall read them and sign them afterwards. My secretary has drawn them up. He knows a good deal about *law*. I have practically educated and brought him up to

assist me. He is the son of an old friend who died suddenly and left his family unprovided for. I took pity on Paul and sent him to school. Later—as I said—I made him my own secretary. It is no easy post, I assure you. The begging letters alone amount to tons—in a year. And I strictly investigate every case that seems to me deserving. Besides this there are various businesses—— However, we will go in to dinner. I shall treat you without ceremony. Come.”

I followed her across the hall. It was lofty, and somewhat sombre in style of decoration. We went into the dining room, also vast and sombre, with an oval table set before the fire. In the centre stood a massive silver bowl, holding a few blood-red orchids and graceful asparagus fern. The branched candelabra were shaded with the same colour.

A tall figure turned from the fire-place and faced us.

“Ah! Paul! You *are* here!” said Lady Judith.” Let me introduce you to Madame de Marsac—Mr. D'Eyncourt.”

She gave me my proper name, I noticed. It had a strange sound. It was so long since I had heard it.

The young man came forward and bowed. I thought a look of surprise flashed into his eyes, but I put that down to his probable knowledge of circumstances.

We seated ourselves. I glanced with some curiosity at the young secretary. He was not in the least good-looking. His face was pale and somewhat stern. Only his eyes had a hint of humour that belied the sternness. He was clean-shaven, and the chin gave a decided hint of masterfulness. His hair was of a soft dark brown, with an inclination to curl at the temples—an inclination that seemed to have been vigorously checked by use of brush and pomade. Yet, withal, a little kink or wave broke rebelliously over an unusually white forehead, and softened the sternness of the face amazingly.

Our conversation at first was of the stereotyped and stilted order. I was conscious of a vague embarrassment. Lady Judith seemed absorbed by her dinner.

Two footmen waited on us in velvet-shod silence, through four perfect courses.

Then liqueurs, coffee and fruit were placed on the table, and Lady Judith brought out her cigarette case.

She offered me one and I took it. I glanced involuntarily at Paul D'Eyncourt. He met my glance with a quizzical smile.

"No. I don't smoke. It seems wonderful, I suppose; but in these days when women do everything, a man can only claim distinction by self-abnegation in some form."

"You used to smoke," said Lady Judith. "It's only a fad of yours to give it up. I believe in private your abnegation is forgotten."

"Indeed, no," he said. "I am not two-faced."

"Then you and Madame de Marsac should be friends," observed Lady Judith. "I have called her the only honest woman of my acquaintance."

He gave me a swift, keen glance. "That is a rare virtue. You are not a Frenchwoman, are you? Not that I mean any slight on the *entente cordiale*, but I was thinking of your name, and, if I may say so, your accent?"

"She has lived most of her life in Paris," interposed Lady Judith. "I may as well tell you, Madame de Marsac, that Paul here knows of my scheme and does not approve of it. For all that he has to witness our signatures presently."

"I am not in a position to disapprove of any scheme of yours, Lady Judith," said the young man gravely. "It is my privilege merely to assist in carrying it out."

"Perhaps," I said sharply, "you thought it was premature on Lady Judith's part to offer me this chance. You weighed nationality and profession in the scales of prejudice, and anticipated false weight?"

"You are not complimentary to yourself. Nor quite just to me. I merely said that the outlay was large, and *the experiment—well—*" He gave a slight shrug of

his shoulders. "The experiment is built on the foundations of a previous failure. But, of course, you must be aware of the popularity of your business. It is founded on a basis old as civilisation. Feminine vanity—like the poor—we have had always with us."

"It is a very excellent foundation," said Lady Judith. "Women were put into the scheme of creation as its ornamental side. Beauty has always been a potent factor in history, in art, in social success. Why should it not hold its place as a valuable asset in the debtor and creditor account of life. What other attribute have we that is at once so valuable and desirable. Genius, amiability, domestic virtues, platform notoriety, even the highest awards of university or college, what are they before the presence and the influence of one supremely beautiful woman? And more (you may believe me or not), not one of those excellent moral or talented females, but would gladly exchange all her primitive virtues and talents for the beauty of that other woman! Life is too strong to be killed out by anything but death; and even at death's approach a woman fears the eyes of her friends more than bodily pain. She knows what they will say of her when the sick-room door is closed."

"Lady Judith leaves one no illusions," observed Paul D'Eyncourt. "I should be sorry to sweep aside all my faith in the sex, in her summary fashion. *Toujours femme varie* points ever to that rare exception which shall enchant and console man at last."

"For how long?" demanded Lady Judith. "For just as long as he buys her gowns, and decks her with jewels, and permits her to rival her dearest friend in the matter of decoration or popularity. Oh! believe me, women can be very enchanting and very consoling when they get their own way, and life runs on velvet tires for them! But there is another side to the picture!"

"There is the side you always refuse to look at, Lady Judith," said the young secretary, gently.



She stared sharply at him. "What do you mean?"

"I was thinking of the sadness—the pathos—the patience. Of what women have to bear and to hide. Of the countless sins of man against her. Of intensity of feeling, narrowed by a life of perpetual self-denial; the self-denial of mothers and of wives."

"Ah!" said Lady Judith—blowing a cloud of smoke from her painted lips—"You are speaking of the virtues of the populace. I know nothing about them."

She rose abruptly and pushed back her chair. "If you have finished your coffee, Madame de Marsac, we will go into my study and read through those papers."

Paul d'Eyncourt walked over and opened it for us. As I passed him he gave me another searching, ironical glance. It annoyed me. It made me think of his vindication of those "other" women. The women of whom I or Lady Judith knew nothing—and cared less.

I followed her across the hall. I heard the firm, regular tread of the secretary echoing after mine. It is strange how trivial a thing will jog one's mental elbow; will set one's nerves vibrating to some past memory, locked away in one of those mysterious brain cells that hold us prisoners of our fate. That step behind my own, marching steadily, unconcernedly, across the marble floor, brought back such a memory. For a moment, the sombre spaces and magnificence around me, swayed and reeled before my eyes. I put out a hand impulsively and caught the wall to steady myself.

In an instant another hand had clasped it. I was conscious of support. I struggled for self-mastery.

"Are you not well? How white you look," I heard Paul d'Eyncourt say.

"I felt—a little faint—I am all right again." I drew my hand from his. "So stupid—I don't know what came over me. A sort of dizziness."

"*Turkish cigarettes, perhaps?*"

The blood rushed to my face. I made no answer, but entered the study where Lady Judith was standing looking thoughtfully at a document in her hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

The memory of that evening blends now with so many changes, such rapid following of events, such bewildering and confusing incidents, that I claim a month's advance in this history in order to marshal my facts and make of them a clear record.

The leisure of to-night is almost the first leisure I have been permitted. But to-night marks a holiday-time for me and all the host of workers, for it is Christmas Eve.

My beautiful rooms, with their complete and lovely furnishing, their complement of all that vanity needs, or feminine charms exact, are closed for the holidays. My clients (so numerous now that I have a skilled assistant at work under me) are scattered abroad for a time; but not before they were furnished with an assortment of lotions and creams, and other toilet requisites that represented a small fortune.

It was almost incredible to me at first that success should be so easy of accomplishment. Not a week had passed without new visitors—new claimants for treatment. Interviewers besieged me. My photograph was eagerly sought. I was asked to advertise in every sixpenny journal of any note on terms quoted as "favourable," and usually representing twenty-five to fifty pounds. I was confronted daily by the spectacle of age travestied as youth. Of the dreaded "thirty-five" demanding to look like twenty. Of other ages, varying from two to three-score, beseeching the arts of concealment, yet only proving an advertisement of what they deemed concealed. Whether it was the novelty of my system, or the wonders of my rooms—or my own creditable appearance as advocate of my professional skill—I cannot tell. *But the truth remains* that the women came to me

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in flocks. To me, who but a few weeks before had stood alone and despairing, and comparatively friendless on that "Bridge of Sighs" which spans London's murky river.

To-night I gave myself up to remembering all this, and wondering how it had come about.

Why had Lady Judith, of all women sought me? And why had she evinced so marked an interest in my welfare? But for her I might still have been plodding on in this insignificant flat, instead of bursting comet-like upon London and its numerous feminine—diplomatists.

The old clients—Mrs. Dickey Johnson—Lady Ormaroyd—Mesdames de Montserrat and Audley, had been full of curiosity at my transition. They had examined my rooms and my apparatus with keen, almost vulgar interest. They had appraised and peered, and flitted to and fro, and turned things upside down, and asked more questions than I could—or desired to—answer. All the time they were consumed with longing to know *who* had "fixed me up" in this style. Where the money had come from?

It amused me immensely, this curiosity. The hints to entrap me—the suggestions that I studiously ignored.

I watched them flitting to and fro in my spacious suite. Discovering that the fireplace was a genuine "Adams," that the ceiling and decorations were worthy of that illustrious name. That the whole scheme of colour was reposeful—as I had meant it to be; and that a "guinea treatment" in such an abode of luxury was cheap at the price. Of course, my fees had advanced with my address. I had also a staff of girls, dressed in dove-grey cashmere and muslin aprons, who ushered in the visitors, showed them where to wait, and made up their purchases in neat, unremarkable boxes, which looked innocent enough for chocolate—or scent, should prying eyes fall upon them.

All this had kept me very busy, and Monsieur Thibaud also. He had had to prepare a large stock of my "recipes." *The climax* was yet to come when my famous de l'Enclos

face-wash should be put on the market—*my* market—*bien entendu*. For none of these things could be procured except at my establishment.

I had resolved not to bring out the "Eau de l'Enclos" until the New Year. The preparation was difficult and expensive, and I wanted a sufficient stock in hand to answer the possible demand for it. Meanwhile I had the satisfaction of paying Monsieur Thibaud a very large account, and feeling that at least one honest soul had reason to bless the craze for Beauty-culture!

I was not sorry for a brief space of leisure. My walk or drive to and fro between my flat and my business premises was all the exercise I obtained. Almost every hour was occupied either with treatments or consultations, or my ever-increasing correspondence, and the postal arrangements it necessitated. By night-time I was so tired that I scarcely cared even to read. I knew only too well the value of my own appearance to neglect it. I knew I must never look jaded, pale, worn; even if I felt such symptoms. Therefore, I was specially careful of my food, and went to bed as early as possible, and used stimulating *sachets* in my bath, and the most insinuating and artful of all my complexion "restorers," before I faced the cruel, searching, impertinent eyes of curious women, and notable women, and society beauties who came with each day, to see "what the new Beauty Doctor was like."

Some of them came for no other reason. They would examine me as if I were a picture, or a statue, or an ornament. They would chatter countless sillinesses, or waste hours of my time over pretended "consultations," and then go off with some vague promise of a further appointment, or the purchase of the "cheapest" cosmetic or cream on my list of toilet specialities! This class of women was my special detestation. "Smart" women; ill-bred, extravagant, over-bearing; slangy, loud-voiced and insolent;

who seemed to consider their mere visit of curiosity, an honour; and their meagre orders sufficient reward for the time and patience they wasted.

But for a brief while I was free; all this weary existence was over. I need not go to my grand establishment until after the holidays. As I lay back in my extending chair, and watched the bright fire, and luxuriated in the perfect rest that was my happy possession, I indulged in a brief spell of retrospection. It showed me myself, my scheme, my dread of failure, and my sudden good fortune. It showed me the startling change between mediocrity and success. It showed how by one wave of Fate's magic wand I had attained the height of an ambition. And it seemed to me that there had been no risk, no outlay, no vexatious waiting upon feminine caprice.

Here I was, head and shoulders above the host of "Specialists," and doubtless envied by them as but two months ago they had been envied by me.

A flash of hope, a possibility of freedom, came to me as I thought of it.

"I am not ambitious. I only want to make enough money to retire on. Then I shall buy a little country cottage with a garden and live there in peace," I said to Barbe Piccotée. "I shall not squander my income on folly and extravagance. I see enough of them every day—and their results! The moment I can give this business up I shall do so. But I must work it into fame, as Lady Judith desires. I must preserve my secrets until they have acquired a certain market value. Then——"

I closed my eyes. I drifted into a blissful dream of peace and simple pleasures, from which all things appertaining to feminine artifice would be for ever banished.

## XII

THE clash and clangour of bells were an irritating reminder of Christmas morning. Of services which all self-respecting, law-abiding folk should be attending.

The bells, however, were not notably seconded by external signs of Christmas. The day was gloomy. A mixture of grey fog and sooty drizzle; a chill easterly wind blew an unbecoming tint into people's noses and cheeks, and set their eyes streaming. I watched the church-going processions from my window. I listened to the music of the Abbey bells, and I wondered vaguely if it all meant—anything? If external signs of piety were really representative of national religious faith, or merely the outcome of past forces; the forces of generations of church and chapel-goers; the forces of respectability; the forces of doing "what one's neighbours did."

During my years in Paris I had never kept Christmas as a religious festivity. Here—my first Christmas in England since childhood—I felt considerable wonder at the Sunday spectacle of the streets. The closed shops, the lessened traffic, and the well-dressed family crowds, prayer-book in hand, hastening to various churches for the Christmas Day services. Yet, surely, I told myself, the religion of a nation should prove itself something deeper and truer than superficial respectability.

But did it?

The masses were but individuals; but if each individual of the masses acted up to what was professed to-day, or any other day set apart for religious observance, how could crime and sin, dishonesty and bloodshed, folly and

immorality still run merrily on, unchecked and unashamed! It would be impossible. Therefore, I argued, the observance of religion is *not* religion. It is a form, a sham; a conforming to public opinion because such opinion is necessary to the preserving of respectability. There are Atheists in Cathedrals as well as in the Free Thinkers' hall. There are idol-worshippers in the Courts of the Temple as well as before the altars of Mammon. Yet all goes merrily as long as the "outside of cup and platter is clean."

That is all the world demands. All that priest and politician care about. "Look at this Sabbath-keeping, God-fearing, respectable multitude! Look at our ritual, our services, our Sunday-schools! Look at our 'Mothers' meetings,' our Charity Concerts, our Charity Bazaars, our Tract depôts, our Bible-distributing vans, our Sunday literature! Look at this great spectacle of Christian influences, and say is it any wonder we are the great and influential nation that we proclaim ourselves to be!"

I turned away at last from the window to the cheerful aspect of the fire, and the unwonted spectacle of piles of Christmas cards. I sat down and turned them over, with an irrepressible smile at a fresh proof of British economy which sent its seasonable wishes in open envelopes to save a halfpenny. Little traits like these strike an absentee as distinctly humorous. My clients had evidently deemed me worthy of halfpenny remembrance. Lady Judith had sent a very simple memento. A floral horse-shoe with "Good Luck" printed underneath. But there was also a more elaborate card, addressed in the same handwriting. A firm bold hand, with beautifully-formed and distinct characters.

I wondered absently if it could be that of Lady Judith's secretary? I wondered also what a graphologist expert would say to that handwriting as expressive of the writer's own characteristics.

This reminded me that I should see him to-night, for I *was to make one of* Lady Judith's Christmas party. I had not

been to her house since that eventful evening when our deed of partnership was signed. I had not seen or heard anything of Paul D'Eyncourt since he had put me into my cab at the door. But I had often thought of his words.

"Won't you wish me success?" I had said, as I gave him my hand.

"I could wish you a worthier enterprise," he had answered.

The ungracious response had annoyed me at the time. It had rankled in my mind ever since.

To know that one's deeds are ignoble in one's own sight gives one the pleasure of honest self-condemnation; but to hear those deeds arraigned by an outside judge is to suffer humiliation for them and for oneself. Like all outside criticism also, it touches that secret spring of self-approbation, whose first instinct is the vindication of what is condemned, no matter how unworthy or how blameable it may be.

There *are* millionaires who declare that wealth can be gained by innocent, honest, and perfectly straightforward dealings with their fellow men! There *are* bond-slaves of the social hemisphere who profess an absolute independence of thought and action the moment they are criticised. In like manner does the author defend his work—and the critic his judgment; and the cleric his professions; and the men of law their rapacity; and the judge his injustice. Each and all are conscious of *motives* behind the actual surface of effects. But the said motives possess the sacredness of self-interest, and woe betide the intruder who dare intermeddle with *that* human prerogative!

At last I threw aside all that pile of cards, letters and bills.

"I shall have to employ a secretary for myself"—I said, half aloud. A thought flashed across my mind. The thought of Julie Thibaud. Her father had told me she was much better—*much stronger*. Why should she not come



to me for certain hours and manage my correspondence. I usually brought it home, and it occupied my evenings, and was at times extremely wearisome. But Julie could type to my dictation. I could afford to pay her a salary equal to what she had received from an office. The hours would be short—and she would have considerably more leisure and freedom.

"I think I will call round and speak about it," I said to myself, and summoning Barbe Piccotée bade her put up a basket of fruit and flowers as a Christmas gift. More substantial offerings relative to the *cuisine* had already been despatched.

I changed into a walking skirt and coat, and, taking the basket in my hand, faced murky atmosphere and slippery pavement on my errand.

The shop was closed, but I rang the bell. Monsieur Thibaud himself answered it.

"I have come to see Mademoiselle Julie" I said, "and have brought her a little *souvenir de Noel*. May I come in?"

"Ah, Madame! But you are always welcome," he said. "And the poor *p'tite*, she will be so happy. She loves so the flowers and the fruit. Surely madame is an angel of goodness."

I laughed gaily. "Indeed, I'm nothing of the sort. How is your daughter? Still keeping up the improvement?"

"But, yes, madame. She had one queer—I know not how to say—*crise des nerves*. It comes to her after the last visit of that Mademoiselle St. Vincent, who is the friend of the monsieur of the automobile. She comes to announce departure for the Riviera. *Pour faire ses adieux*. And first of all Julie is excited, and then she becomes all that is of the most melancholy and despondent. Then once more she is bright and almost of good health. To-day, not quite so bright, but the visit of madame, it will—how one says?—arouse her. She talks so often of madame, and of how *she is so thoughtful, so gracieuse*."

"Shall I go upstairs and see her?" I asked.

"But, of course! It is madame who honours us by such a request."

I ran up the narrow staircase, and knocked at the door of the girl's room.

"Who is there?" came in sharp and querulous tones.

I answered, and after a few moments delay the door was unlocked.

"I've brought you a Christmas memento," I said, showing the basket. She looked very frail and young in her pale blue flannel gown, and with her hair loose about her shoulders.

"Oh, how lovely—how good of you!"

She took the basket and walked slowly to her chair, and drew another one forward for me.

The light was very dim, for the heavy curtains over the window were drawn. But there was a bright fire in the grate, and the room looked cheerful and cosy as usual.

She lay down rather languidly, pulling the cushions up behind her for support. She had set the basket on the table by her side.

"I hear you are better," I said. "I am so glad."

"Better?" She looked up quickly. "I am not so tired—I have no pain. Yes, I—I suppose I am better."

She sighed wearily, as if the admission cost an effort and brought no comfort with it. "It is kind of you to trouble about me," she went on. "You are so much occupied now. My father has told me."

"Yes! I have a great deal more to do. That is partly the reason I came to see you. I have a proposal to make to you."

"To me?"

"Yes," I said. "My business entails a vast amount of correspondence. More than I can manage by myself. I was thinking to-day, that I must employ a secretary. Then I remembered you were a typist and might perhaps assist

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me. I should only require you for an hour in the morning and perhaps two in the evening. I would pay you at the rate of your former employers. Do you think you would care to undertake it?"

She sat up eagerly and looked at me. "*Care?* Of course I would care. Only—— You see I am not always well, or able to work——"

"I would take that risk."

"But why should you? You might so easily find girls, hundreds of them, who would jump at such a post and I——"

"Well, what about you? It means only a little effort of will. I think your ailment is more mental than bodily."

"Why should you think so?"

She spoke abruptly, angrily, almost rudely. I looked at her in surprise.

"Why? Really I cannot say; only I *do* think so."

"I have had a great deal to worry me, to make me anxious," she said, with a sudden change of tone. "Father does not know, he would not understand. And I have no friend to speak to, now that Ada has gone away."

"Let me be your friend," I said, persuasively. "I feel for you deeply in your loneliness—your youth—your sufferings. I am sure I could help you—could do you good. Won't you trust me?"

She gave me an odd, furtive glance; that same glance as of a child detected in error, and half fearful of punishment in store.

"I should like to be your secretary," she said, "and to earn money again, instead of having to ask father for it. But if sometimes I am ill—unable to come, what then?"

"Why anticipate evil? Perhaps the mere fact of employment—of feeling your own importance—your own necessity will drive these shadowy fancies into the *background*."

"I wish it might," she said. Then suddenly she shivered violently and drew the rug about her.

"Are you cold?" I asked in surprise, for to me the room was almost unpleasantly warm, with its blazing fire and closed and curtained windows.

"No" she said, "not cold. It is an internal shiver that comes over me sometimes. Feel my hand, it is quite warm."

I took the thin, extended fingers in mine. Certainly they were warm; feverishly so. I began to wonder what really was the matter with her. Her cheeks had flushed to sudden, vivid crimson; her dark eyes looked strangely bright. She seemed as excited now as she had previously been listless and inert. Yet what was the reason for the change. I could detect none.

"I really think I should like to accept your proposal, Madame Beaudelet," she said, suddenly leaning forward and clasping her hands around her knees. For a moment or two she sat thus, hugging herself, and half smiling, as at some pleasant thought.

"Have you a type-writer?" she asked at last. "I learnt at the Yöst school. But I haven't a machine of my own."

"I will get one, of course, if you agree to come to me," I said.

"Agree? Of course I agree. It will be delightful—and so easy. So different from that hateful office—those vulgar clerks." The listlessness had gone from voice and face. She looked a changed creature.

"And you will really give me thirty pounds a year?" she went on. "And only three hours' work a day. It seems too good to be true! When I think of all I suffered at that other place, I feel it is like stepping from a prison to liberty. Why did you think of me? Are you *sure* you mean it."

"Quite sure. I thought of you because I look upon your father as a friend. I should never have succeeded so well in my business without his aid."

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"Oh, poor father," she said, carelessly. "I suppose he does know all about drugs and medicines. I was wondering, madame, if any—any of those great ladies who come to you for treatment ever ask you to get certain prescriptions made up for them?"

"Prescriptions," I said. "Of what sort?"

"Oh! cocaine or morphia. One hears they are so much used, and I thought——"

I looked keenly at her. "But how should you know about such things?" I asked, wondering.

"Oh, Ada St. Vincent used to tell me. She heard a lot of stories from the men who took her out to supper. Things that were talked of in their Clubs. And they all said that "drug-taking" was the fashionable complaint. I thought perhaps some of your customers might ask you to get some stuff for them. You know it is very difficult, because chemists won't always make up a prescription without a doctor's orders. And some chemists pretend they don't keep it. Father does. He says it's dangerous, and that he doesn't want to have any in his shop."

She was talking so eagerly, so quickly, that I was astonished. All her languor had disappeared. I had never seen her so interested or alert. I supposed it arose from a new interest in life. The feeling of independence. She puzzled me to-day as much as she had saddened me on previous occasions. But the change convinced me that my surmise of hysteria was a correct one. Once aroused from morbid brooding on herself and her fancied ailments she would be a different being. If I could bring about so happy an alteration, well, I should have performed one unselfish action to set against my many sins!

Before leaving I told Monsieur Thibaud of my project, and of Julie's acceptance of it. He seemed incredulous. That a girl, who for months had scarcely left her room or her couch, should suddenly consent to work, certainly *appeared odd*. But I explained my theory to him. The

girl was the prey of her own morbid fancies. She needed to be roused and stimulated—scolded even. Not petted and sympathised with. To me it seemed as if some bad influence had come into her life and exercised a malign obsession. Something she had been too weak to combat; of which she was secretly ashamed. For my own part I was inclined to attribute it to this friend, with her vicious personality, and her absurdly aristocratic *nom de théâtre*. But she was away, far removed from the girl's proximity at present, and, therefore, I had hopes of countermanding that influence. Ac

I had never experienced anything so touching as the poor little chemist's gratitude. The tears were rolling down his cheeks as he followed me to the door.

"The good God will bless and prosper you, madame, for all you have done for me and my child, and always I shall pray for you when I make my own devotions. Madame, if you save my child, command of me what you please. My life is at your service."

I hurried away. Gratitude so eloquent only troubled me. I had done nothing to deserve it. I might not ever be able to cure Julie Thibaud, though she interested and perplexed me enough to make such cure an important factor in my life's work.

For I remembered a similar case in Paris at the hospital, and I shuddered when I thought of that poor, loving old man confronted by a spectre that would haunt him all the days of his life as that other father had been haunted.

"If I thought prayers were ever heard or answered I would pray for him," I thought, as I looked down the murky street to where the Abbey spire lifted itself heavenwards.

### XIII

I HAD no idea whether Lady Judith's Christmas party was to be large or small; formal or intimate. But I adopted the *juste milieu* of a toilette, that should be at once simple and striking. It was in colour the delicate golden-brown of an autumn leaf, over which fell paler tints of chiffon. Towards the bodice and shoulder line these suggestions deepened to a brilliant orange. I wore no ornaments; my throat and neck were still firm and smooth; and, instead of a fan, I carried a few loose brown and amber orchids, tied with ribbon, matching the gown.

I was shown upstairs on this occasion to remove my cloak. As I gave it to the maid, a door leading into an adjoining room was suddenly opened.

"Is that you, Madame de Marsac?" said the voice of Lady Judith. "Come in here a moment."

I obeyed the summons, and walked into a large, sombre-looking bedroom; a bedroom at once massive and unfeminine; but my first curious glance was arrested by the sight of Lady Judith herself. She confronted me in so transformed and remarkable an aspect that I was speechless from sheer surprise.

Instead of the rusty wig, the rows of countless little curls, the fierce, black brows, I saw a snowy Pompadour head and a carefully coloured complexion. A well cut gown of black velvet, simply *berthed* with Venetian point, gave dignity to the stout figure, and certainly lessened its *stoutness*.

The diamonds at her throat were mounted on a black velvet band, and thus concealed those fatal lines and folds which speak age as nothing else can speak it.

"Well?" she asked. "What have you to say? I have taken your advice."

"My advice?"

"Given indirectly, but worth listening to. I have resolved to accept age instead of travestying it. Is the result satisfactory?"

"You look—magnificent," I said, and I meant it. I could never have imagined that the white hair would have so altered and improved her.

She turned, and gave a long look into the massive mahogany-framed mirror.

"I am pleased—myself," she said. "I was determined not to tell you beforehand. I shall surprise everyone to-night. Tessie Ormaroyd is coming, and her daughter—Gwendoline Lorrimer. Have you ever met her? No. . . . I was wondering? And Sir Joseph Talboys, and George Beaufroy, the writer. Then two maiden cousins of mine, whom I always have to ask for Christmas—(one of the penalties of possessing relations!)—and Archey Templeton. He is the most absurd young man in London and he loves all 'elderly' women. He says they are so interesting. I hope you will find the party amusing. You have been working very hard. A little change will do you good."

"Yes, I am rather glad of a rest," I said.

Then I added, "What about these people? Lady Ormaroyd, of course, knows me, but the others——"

"Oh! we shall drop the profession. I have explained it to Tessie."

"And—Mr. D'Eyncourt. Will he be here?"

"Of course. He is the tame cat of my household. He rarely leaves it. Besides, I like contrasts. To see him and Archey together is as good as a play. A Pinero play by choice. But now we must go down. I told Parkson to



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show you upstairs to my dressing-room; the others will be in the cloak-room."

She took up her gloves and fan, then gave me a long scrutinizing glance.

"You certainly have the art of dressing; and of suiting your own style," she observed. "I never saw a woman look less fashion-platey and yet more perfectly expressive of the *mode* of the day than you always do."

"Every woman should know her style and *les défauts de ses qualités*," I said.

"But not one in a hundred does! They think to be copies or to be extreme means being well-dressed. Nothing of the sort."

I laughed. "Tell that to your *modiste*." I said.

"No. We are always fighting as it is."

"There is but one way of dressing well," I said, as we moved on. "It is to dress for one's occasion, and for one's own style. But most women rush off to order a gown because they've seen it in a shop, or on another woman, or in some fashion paper. And yet the said gown may be absolutely unsuited to themselves individually."

We had reached the drawing-room floor, and a footman threw open the door.

The size and space, the two blazing fires, the brilliance of the electric light, and the masses of flowers and palms and other plants made an imposing picture. Lady Judith crossed to the smaller room. None of her guests had yet arrived.

"I hate these huge places," she said, as she seated herself by the fire. "One never feels comfortable, or warm, or friendly. I daresay you'll laugh, but I often envy you that snug little *piéd à terre* of yours."

"I am afraid your envy would not outlive possession," said I.

"Here they come, I suppose," she said, as the door was thrown open. "Now watch the faces when they see my *new wig*!"

Two funny old ladies were announced, dressed alike in black satin and lace *fichus*, with mittens on their hands and large black fans dangling from their wrists. They took quite a long time to traverse the room, and by the time they had reached Lady Judith, the footman was announcing "Lady Ormaroyd, Mrs. Lorrimer, and Sir Joseph Talboys."

I looked with some curiosity at Lady Ormaroyd's daughter. She was a tall, elegant young woman of some twenty-five years, with fair hair and a serious face and curiously sedate manner.

I was introduced to her and to Sir Joseph and the queer little maiden sisters, who represented the Hon. Miss and Hon. Susan Tallifer. They all murmured the stereotyped Christmas formula and—so it seemed to me—endeavoured to display a forced but seasonable *bonhomie*, which they were far from feeling. Lady Judith told them whom they were to take down, or be taken down by, and at the same moment the male contingent entered all together. I noted that each fresh arrival glanced with covert, though well-bred surprise at Lady Judith's changed *coiffure*. I saw that the two maiden relatives were much impressed by it. Their own heads were representative of modern "fronts," arranged in rolls of set curls instead of the old-timed *bandeaux*. The colour of the hair probably represented what they desired; not what their age demanded. Perhaps they were deciding at last to profit by their kinswoman's sensible example.

At last Paul D'Eyncourt entered. He seemed to know everyone, and I wondered whom he was to take in to dinner.

I knew my own fate.

He sauntered up to me just as D'Eyncourt had shaken hands. I thought I had never seen so perfect a presentment of immaculate youth in equally immaculate garb. It seemed a marvel that anyone could eat, drink, speak, or walk in *such a flawless condition*.

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"I have not had the pleasure of meeting you here before, Madame de Marsac," he said. "But I have heard you spoken of——"

He paused, meaningly—— "By Lady Judith," he added.

I breathed again. I had no desire that my professional name should stand as lady-in-waiting to social prerogatives.

"She is my dearest and oldest friend," he went on in a suave, modulated voice. "No words can express how much I owe to her."

I began to wonder whether Lady Judith held a monopoly in young male protégés; but I only said that she seemed very kind-hearted.

"Oh, no," he said, smiling gently. "There you are certainly mistaken. She is not in the least what one would call an amiable or a good-natured woman. But she possesses a business sense that leads her to benefit the unfortunate. I am one of that class. So I come to her for relief. A guinea a week, and Sunday dinner thrown in. See how simple a thing existence is."

I stared at him. Then I laughed. "I suppose it is a joke?"

"I never joke, my dear lady. Life is much too strenuous for levity. If you had any conception of how hard I have to work, you would recognise how impossible it is for me to take a humorous view of existence."

"I suppose I must take your word for it, but—I should certainly never credit you with work so—so——"

"So unsuitable? You are right. I was born to an inheritance of ten thousand a year. I don't know who has it now. The Jews I believe. They forced me into giving it up. Sooner than dispute, I walked out of my ancestral halls one morning, and left my valet and my solicitor to do the best they could. I can't say they were grateful. One sued me for wages, and the other for some curious thing called "costs." Since then I have lived by my wits. I am a professional *diner-out*; a K.C. of the profession. It dresses me and

affords me an attic in Pall Mall. There you have my history in brief. I see they are going in to dinner! Allow me——”

I put my hand on his immaculate coat-sleeve, and we dropped into the rear of the procession.

“I don’t know how these things strike you, Madame de Marsac?” continued this strange youth. “By the way, you are not French, are you?—Only by marriage. That is an excellent definition. As I was saying, I don’t know how these things strike you. I am reminded of many absurdities—one is a rhyme that goes—

*‘The animals walked in two by two;  
The bumble-bee and the kangaroo.’*

We are very like animals, are we not? Going in to feed. What a lot English people think about eating, and how badly they cook what they elect to eat?”

“I can hardly tell as yet,” I answered. “I happen to have a French cook for my own requirements, and I have not dined out anywhere until to-night.”

“How friendless you must be! The first thing we do in this country is to ask one another to dinner. I presume your circle of acquaintances is not—extensive?”

“No,” I said. “And if what you say is correct, I am glad of the fact. I have no great liking for dinner parties.”

“Candid—and sensible. I used to like them, until I made them my profession. Naturally, now I detest them. It is a curious trait in human nature that it always dislikes what benefits it. . . . These are our places. Ah, Lady Judith has taken my advice and ignored seasonable decorations! Yet I fear we shall not escape the good old stodgy English turkey, and English plum pudding. Relics of barbarian ancestors, who roasted oxen whole in their baronial halls, and broached casks of wine and barrels of beer, by way of reminding Christendom of its title to the Christian’s respect!”

I glanced at him with surprised interest as I refused soup. Lady Judith had spoken of Archey Templeton as the “most

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absurd young man in London," and one who only admired "elderly women," because he found them interesting. Was he simply amusing himself at my expense, or did he believe I was taking him seriously? In Paris I had never heard anyone talk like this. But, then, Frenchmen rarely permit a woman to forget that she represents sex if they are five minutes in her company. Some do it delicately and some offensively, but do it they must, by suggestion, or compliment, or implication.

Archev Templeton had certainly not implied that I was anything except the woman he had been directed to take down to dinner, and who, therefore, had to be conversed with according to custom. But his style of conversation was so novel that I could not tune my own wits to its key.

"I wonder if you recognize that you are the only woman present who has not a bit of holly, or misletoe, or one of those melancholy tributes to the season called 'Christmas roses' about her?" he went on. "One never knows whether a woman appreciates a man's opinion of her gown, or hails him fool for attempting to grasp its subtleties. Certainly yours is a triumph of art, and a triumph of suggestion. All the beauty and all the sadness of the dying year seem embodied in it. And above all rises your own triumphant womanhood, the Venus Victrix of that New Year, so soon to be. The ever-promised; the ever-evasive!"

"Are you favouring me with a real opinion," I said; "or is this part of the dining-out programme you spoke of?"

"Oh! please don't be sarcastic. A sarcastic woman is like unripe fruit—sets all your teeth on edge. I am not fulfilling any programme to-night. Here I am always natural. And Lady Judith is always kind. She sends me down with the most interesting personality of the occasion."

"Two compliments in as many moments!"

"They are only the natural expression of my own feelings. I never pay compliments, Madame de Marsac. Not my *worst enemy* could accuse me of that. Nothing is so fatal to

a perfect understanding between man and woman, as exaggeration of their respective attractions. I want you to accept me as simply as I accept you. I also wish you to understand that I shall make no pretty speeches, or pay you any compliments, that are not a spontaneous tribute to your own deserts."

I laughed again. "But in saying *that*, you are employing the most subtle flattery! Suppose we talk about something besides ourselves. Would not that be a better method of avoiding rocks and shoals of this description? For instance, I am much interested in Mr. George Beaufroy. I have read a great many of his books, and I was delighted to think I should meet him. But——"

"I know. He is not a bit like what you expected. No genius is. They should never permit themselves to be seen in public. The most disappointing person to meet is a celebrity. Nature is rarely generous enough to dower brains with beauty, or beauty with brains."

"What a sweeping assertion!"

"I am speaking of genius. That rare and wonderful flower which is as the blossom of the aloe. We seem to have come to the hundred years' interlude now. There are plenty of clever people, intellectual people, hard-working people; puffing, pushing, self-advertising people; but there is no—genius."

I mentioned a few celebrated names in the world of literature and art.

He shook his head. "They won't live. They won't be remembered. They are traders on tricks, not genuine artists. They are self-conscious. Genius is never self-conscious. It is great because it is humble. It is perfect because it holds divinity within itself, and asks neither reward, nor praise, nor notice. Our friend there——"

I followed his glance to where the noted novelist was sitting beside Lady Judith, and next to Lady Ormaroyd. He was *devouring* a sweetbread, and listening complacently

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to them. The name of his last great book, published simultaneously in fifteen different countries, was on their lips.

"Do you see what I mean?" continued my companion. "Genius could never descend to *that*. Never have its work or its methods discussed between *sole à la Portugaise* and sweetbreads *aux champignons*. Never minister to its stomach while disburdening its brain. Never revel in stolid facts pertaining to editions and publishers' statements. It would seem a desecration, an outrage. It would be as if one chipped bits off a statue to show that it was real marble. As if one opened the heart of a violin in order to find where the tone came from!"

"Do you think anyone—any of the celebrated people of the present day are like that?" I said.

"Like what?"

"Your definition of genius. Conscious—yet humble. Humble in themselves I mean. When the full glare of publicity's electric light is thrown upon one, it must be a very hard matter to retain humility. The world itself forbids it."

"Exactly. That is why genius and the world should be for ever divorced!"

"But would not that be selfish? As much a *pose* as the public parade of one's talents."

"People would say so, of course. The world likes to have its puppets on a string and see them dance. The puppet who won't dance is supposed to be of faulty mechanism. But if it is wise it knows there is more to be gained by tranquillity than exposure."

"I have often wondered"—I said, musingly, "what it really feels like to be very famous. I mean famous in anything. Whether one is proud or—merely dissatisfied—or——"

"I think 'conceited' is the expression," he said. "All the talked-of people I have met are conceited. Also they

are terribly afraid of being overlooked; the women in particular. A female celebrity is like a monkey on a stick. She is always indulging in antics, with a faithful sycophant in attendance to hold the stick and assist the antics. It is very funny. Have you ever heard a woman speak in public? She cannot divorce herself from the bondage of traditions, (unless she hails from the Stars and Stripes). She cannot forego the compliment of sex, be it only a bouquet of flowers, or a lamp shaded to suit her complexion, or the arm of the most important male creature present to conduct her to the platform. Then when she speaks she is certain to wander wide of her point. To introduce trivialities and personalities. If she utters a chance humourism she makes a deliberate pause, so as to allow time for laughter. I once heard a woman—she was by way of being famous, and was the president of some club or institute—well, I heard her address her audience as “*dears*.” It is true the audience was feminine, with the exception of one or two reporters in the gallery. (I was one.) But can you imagine a man calling an assemblage of brother-workers by a term of—endearment?”

“A man would avoid puerility. But as you said, women are the victims of inherited instincts, such as have never hampered men.”

“Exactly. And that is why they should be satisfied with being merely—women. Man will always be ready to work for them; to adore them; to help them. But when they turn aside from his protection and insist upon asserting their own independence they only succeed in making themselves hybrid, ridiculous, intrusive, and irrational creatures, who despise their own sex, and cannot rise to the standard of—ours.”

I laughed amusedly. “Oh, if you only said that sort of thing at a woman’s club—a woman’s institution?”

“I have said it,” he answered. “I spoke once at the *Privateers*; they hissed me. Rose up in battalions and



hissed me. There again they only proved what I had been explaining—the inequality of the sexes! Fancy what would happen in the House if all the members rose in a body and hissed one member for speaking out a plain truth!”

“But is not that just what they do?” I said. “At least, they groan and ‘boo,’ and show their disapprobation in a very marked manner. They display individual disapprobation.”

“But they don’t make a spectacle of the man. I confess, however, my simile was not well drawn. I had been invited to speak. I spoke—and I was hissed. Not a single woman had the courtesy to listen to me, or the decency to rebuke the flock of angry geese who were storming and fussing around. These are the things that make your sex contemptible in the eyes of men.”

He leant back in his chair. He had talked conscientiously through four courses. There was a sudden lull around the table. Several pairs of eyes turned to the door.

“Ah!” said Archey Templeton, softly. “This is the great moment of the evening. The dedication of our senses and sensibilities to the Spirit of the festival. See—it comes: crowned with holly, garlanded with flames. Madame de Marsac, conversation is at end. Let us devote our minds to the solemn rites of the English Plum Pudding!”

#### XIV

In the smaller drawing-room the women drew themselves into a group, and sipped coffee and talked—gowns.

Lady Ormaroyd started the discussion by an allusion to my tawny colouring. "Strange," she said, "that brown is the one colour we shun in an evening gown, and yet here is an instance of its artistic capabilities."

"Very few women know anything about the artistic possibilities of dress," observed Lady Judith. "They allow their dressmakers to dictate what they are to wear. A woman selecting a new gown is the most helpless and undecided creature in existence. She dare not be original. She will not trust her own judgment. She permits herself to be brow-beaten, dictated to, or cajoled into what the *modiste* intends to sell—not what *she* had intended to order. That is why one is so constantly confronted by ill-dressed, inartistic women."

"Copies are so safe," murmured Lady Ormaroyd.

"You are always bullied by your dressmaker," said her daughter. "I never saw anyone so helpless before another woman as you are before that little Madame Véronique."

"Because I owe her such a lot of money," sighed Lady Ormaroyd. "And she has such exquisite things."

"She dresses half the smart women in London," murmured the eldest Miss Tallifer. "But for my own part I have never cared to exchange my people. They know our style—my sister's and mine—and that saves us so much trouble."

She looked affectionately at her thick satin *Duchesse* gown.

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"Yes," chimed in Miss Susan. "We simply order our gowns by post, and they send them to the very day."

"Without a fitting?" exclaimed Lady Ormaroyd.

"Certainly. They have our models to try on upon. Occasionally our maids measure us to see if there is any change. But it is extraordinary how little our figures alter."

"Extraordinary," murmured Miss Susan, with an affectionate glance at her sister's prim, upright form.

"By the way," observed Lady Ormaroyd, "have you heard that Lady Ripley has gone to the Sahara for the winter? Right into the heart of the desert to live in a caravan with only Arab attendants?"

"Only?"—sneered Lady Judith.

Something in her voice made me look keenly at her.

Lady Ormaroyd laughed. "Well, of course one knows what she is! But there's something in gaining a character for eccentricity. The world makes excuses. She left town after startling it with those *tableaux*. Gwen, you lost something by not going to that entertainment. And, talking of gowns, you never saw anything so exquisite as the one she wore that night. It was fit for royalty."

"I thought she had dispensed with a gown altogether on that occasion," observed Lady Judith.

The two maiden sisters put down their coffee cups suddenly. Otherwise they preserved an ostentatious silence. Mrs. Lorrimer turned her serious grey eyes on her mother.

"Don't you think—" she began.

"Oh, my dear, what *does* it matter? We're all women; and I'm sure Lady Judith doesn't mind a little scandal. I *should* like to know who pays for her gowns—now? She's ruined half-a-dozen men already. She boasts that she's the most extravagant woman in London."

"So she is," said Lady Judith, grimly. "Her husband openly refuses to pay her debts again. And she's in the *black books* of the Trade Protection Society."

The maiden sisters' *fichus* fluttered violently. They clasped their mittened fingers together, with a convulsive movement.

"I thought Sahara was quite uninhabited," observed Miss Tallifer.

Lady Ormaroyd laughed. "Oh no. They have hotels and Pears' soap, and all sorts of modern conveniences there," she said. "They'll be inventing a special motor next, warranted to run over sand at express speed."

"Yes, but what can one *do* in the desert?" murmured Miss Susan, plaintively.

"Do?" said Lady Ormaroyd, wickedly. "Well, enjoy idleness as a change, in the company of a special cultivator of the cult. It's called the Rest Cure, you know."

"Don't you think we might drop scandal for once, mother?" protested the serious Gwendoline; "and on this day, too!"

"Gwen has been to two services," explained Lady Ormaroyd. "And naturally feels a little *exaltée*. Father Wylie has great influence over her. You go to confession, don't you, dear? And think scandal one of the Seven Deadly Sins?"

"I think all evil-speaking a sin. It is uncharitable and unworthy of people who profess Christianity."

"I neither profess nor practise it," said Lady Judith.

The maiden sisters shuddered, and gave a shocked and plaintive murmur of protest.

Mrs. Lorrimer coloured. "I am sorry," she said. "It is a condition of mind to me perfectly inexplicable."

"If you had lived in France," I said, "it would have been easily explained."

"But Lady Judith lives in England. In a Christian country. A country upholding the faith and purity of Christ's teaching."

"Upholding it with one hand, and crushing it to the dust with the other," said Lady Judith. "My dear child, don't

talk to me about religion! I was brought up amongst clergymen. My circle of friends numbers three Bishops. They are hopeless and helpless in the present crisis. They can't make their own clergy obey them. They see Ritualism and Romanism profaning the old time-honoured Protestant faith. They behold all manner of weird innovations in the Church. They see the young caught in the snares of sensational services. They see whole flocks of clerics and congregations going over to Rome, because they have become so entangled in doctrinal webs that in despair they throw off all responsibility at last. Change self-wrought handcuffs for prison fetters! Modern religion is nothing but a Barmecide feast. A humiliating ordinance that has instituted Church Parade and restaurant dinners; motor expeditions and Bridge parties."

"Oh, no! No!" cried Mrs. Lorrimer, eagerly. "Believe me, you are wrong. You only deal with generalities—with the surface aspect."

"The surface aspect is a very open and intelligent one," said Lady Judith, grimly. "It preaches a more eloquent sermon of the Church's errors and of clerical crimes than any sermon I ever heard. A force that cannot influence must be weak, and certainly we have no modern evidence of religious force. Decoration and ritual are with us, I grant, but the faith, the *feeling* of religion are only conspicuous by their absence."

"Oh! indeed, I cannot agree with you," began Mrs. Lorrimer. But the opening of the door, and the entrance of the men, cut short the argument.

Lady Judith rose, and moved her chair away from the fire.

"Paul, go and sing something," she said. "We are nearly quarrelling over religion as opposed to ritual. You must play David to our Sauls—or should it be souls?"

I looked up with some eagerness, as the young secretary *turned towards* the open Bechstein. I had no idea that he

possessed musical talent. He and I had only exchanged conventional greetings, owing to the dinner arrangements. It seemed as if those arrangements were to continue.

He seated himself at the piano, without the least affectation. He used no music.

Archey Templeton dropped into the chair by my side.

"Fond of music?" he asked.

"I love it."

"All women say that, unless one asks them if they would like to play bridge."

"I don't even know the game," I said.

He gave an affected start. "Madame de Marsac, where have you lived?"

"Never mind that just now. I want to listen."

The full, deep chords, touched by a master-hand, thrilled me with delight. For so long I had been without music, or the means to obtain its pleasures. I leant forward a little to listen.

He began very softly, the sad and exquisite verses of—

*"As once in May—"*

No one talked or moved. It seemed simply impossible. As the last passionate notes sighed themselves out I glanced at Gwendoline Lorrimer. She met my eyes. There were tears in her's—there were tears in mine. Tears, and an ache in my heart that I had thought killed out of it by its own vain longings, its own vain pain.

"Queer thing, singing," drawled Archey Templeton's voice in my ear. "A fellow throwing his soul into some expression of sentiment that he doesn't really care twopence about! Only trying for effects. But, I suppose, like all women, you judge the effect—not what goes to make it."

"I judge artistic powers by right of artistic feeling," I said, rather angrily. "Of course, there are people who can't tell one note from another, just as there are people who see nothing *behind* a picture; only just the colour, or the *figures*."

"Life goes on just as well for them," he said. "We all talk and write a great deal about the artistic temperament. In reality it only means that a man is selfish or egotistic from a perverted idea that he understands Art. But of course it is an excellent 'pose' in its way."

"Do you believe in anything at all?" I asked, watching Paul D'Eyncourt's fingers as they drew all manner of sweet and tender harmonies from the keys.

"Oh, yes. But not in amateur musicians or—beauty culture."

I started. The words came to me as a surprise. Yet they were uttered so quietly I could not think them intentional.

"Men," I said, hurriedly, "are not expected to believe in that."

"No. Nor to detect its artifices. Nothing amuses me more than the way women imagine they are deceiving us. As if we couldn't see through their little disguises; detect false colour from natural; dyed hair from the real article; a genuine figure from corset effects. Which reminds me, Madame de Marsac, do any of your sex ever think what a liberal education the women's journals have been with their frank disclosures and—indelicate—advertisements? Why have none of you raised a protest? Is it because you don't care if men are disillusioned, or only because you are so innocent that it has never occurred to you they might read those journals as well as yourselves?"

"We are helpless in the matter. It is purely a question of trade. No journal can afford to do without advertisements. The literary contents are the last things to which an editor looks for his income."

"You must be right. To me there is something intensely humiliating in a magazine. The fiction is commonplace; the serious matter, merely British Museum. I gave up the *Strand*, when I found that to reach Sherlock Holmes one must turn over fifty pages of advertisements. Life isn't capable of such monthly efforts!"

Lady Judith was entreating Paul d'Eyncourt to sing again.

"That thing of Saint-Saens you know, it always makes me feel as if I were bathed in moonlight," she expressed it. "Archey—you must be quiet. I cannot have you talking to Madame de Marsac like that! Paul sings Saint-Saens like an angel. He is the only composer who makes me feel religious."

A smile of amusement hovered over Archey Templeton's lips at that announcement, but he said nothing. Lady Ormaroyd was whispering to George Beaufoy. Sir Joseph was ruminating drowsily in a comfortable, deep armchair. Gwen Lorrimer was gazing thoughtfully into the heart of the blazing fire. As for me I was absorbed in sheer delight of listening. I envied Lady Judith her domestic Orpheus, whose talents were at her service whenever she desired.

When his song was finished, Paul D'Eyncourt rose from the piano, and came forward to the group by the fire.

"You are in good form to-night," said Lady Judith, nodding her new white Pompadour approvingly. "Now who's going to oblige next? You—Gwen?"

Mrs. Lorrimer shook her graceful head. "Oh, please, no. I caught cold yesterday, and my voice is awful."

"Those dreadful churches," murmured her mother.

"Well then, Archey, you must sing," said Lady Judith. "Oh! don't pretend—I know you. Of course it will be shocking, but that doesn't matter. Let me hear your last inspiration."

The young man rose languidly and crossed to the piano. Paul D'Eyncourt dropped into his vacant chair. I turned to him impulsively.

"You have given me a great treat," I said.

"It is nice of you to say so. I haven't had a word with you yet. How are things going on?"

"The—business you mean?"

"Yes. You are kept hard at it, I suppose?"



"Yes," I said. "I am appreciating a holiday in consequence."

"I think you enjoyed yourself at dinner. What a good listener you are!"

"What an amusing talker Mr. Templeton is."

"Doesn't he get on your nerves? I can't stand him. And it's all got up for the occasion. He doesn't mean anything he says. He's the most arrant *poseur* in London. Even his singing is an affectation. He has a good voice, but he won't use it sensibly."

I looked at the performer. He had thrown back his head. His eyes were on the ceiling. His slender, beautifully kept hands brought out the weirdest harmonies.

Then they broke into a rippling accompaniment, that seemed to hold the murmur of running waters. Presently words dropped into the stream. I can call it nothing else. They were not sung, neither were they exactly spoken. But one heard them falling—falling. Now loud, now soft; now tender, now passionate. Yet always beautifully clear and distinct.

*"I wish we were dead together to day,  
Lost sight of, hidden away out of sight;  
Clasped and clothed in the cloven clay,  
Out of the world's way—out of the light."*

*"How we should slumber, how we should sleep,  
Far in the dark, with the dreams and the dews.  
And dreaming, grow to each other; and weep,  
Laugh low, kiss softly, murmur and muse.  
How we should slumber!  
How we should sleep!"*

Lady Judith closed her eyes and leant back in her chair. The expression on her face was almost beatific. I felt my own face burn as the vocalist rendered verse after verse.

Instinctively I glanced again at Mrs. Lorrimer. She was calm and serious as ever. As for Lady Ormaroyd, she looked intensely amused.

When it was over the performer turned to us all. "Swinburne's words and my own setting," he observed. "I dislike *singing* a poem. It should be expressed musically—never shouted, or modulated, or falsettoed, as professionals insist upon rendering it. It is the mistakes of artists that have decorated art. Unfortunately, in this country scarcely anyone understands Art. They take the artist's explanation; and the artist's explanation is to bellow out a deep note if he is a bass, to attempt a decorative phrase if he is a baritone, and to stand on tiptoe and shriek out A or B or C in *alt* if he is a tenor. Then the audience go wild with delight. To them the last high yell of the soprano is the one thing worth waiting for. The last piercing shriek of the tenor the proper signal for an encore! An English musical audience is the most curious study of appreciation in the world. They must have that 'high note' or they would be capable of demanding their money back. They don't care about the method, the composer, the art, or the artist. There they sit, row upon row, stolid and patient, waiting for the chandelier to jingle, or the singer's throat to crack. It matters nothing so long as they get that note."

"I don't agree with you," said Paul D'Eyncourt. "English people are as appreciative of good music and good singing as any other nation."

"What other nation would have encored poor Sims Reeves at sixty years of age for the farcical absurdity of 'My Pretty Jane'? Do you call *that* music?"

"Sims Reeves was renowned for what he had been and had done."

"My dear fellow! That's all tommy-rot. The artist should never be confused with his art. No one knows better when his day is over. No one should know better the fatal mistake of trading on public sympathy. It is

humiliating and contemptible. Far better send round the hat and ask for help than cheat the public into paying abnormal prices for sake of a name that is—only a name.”

“But English people are so prejudiced,” said George Beaufroy, rising and walking forward. “The *name* is much more to them than the art. That is why there are so many bitter opponents to the Bacon theory. Not because it belittles the work of a great dramatist, but because it takes away the name that has stood for the value of the work in men’s memories.”

“I am an ardent Baconian myself,” said Archey Templeton, leaving the piano and joining the group round the fire. “Not only have I proved conclusively to my own satisfaction that William Shakespeare, of Stratford-on-Avon, never *did* write, and never could have written the plays attributed to him, but I find it such an admirable topic of controversy. It is nothing less than delightful to throw this pebble of American discovery into the placid waters of British belief. What a storm it arouses; what waves and billows surge and swell around the dispute. Someone has said that a woman’s interest in a man’s life only begins when another woman enters it. In like manner, the English interest in Shakespeare’s life only began when another Shakespeare entered it.”

“I’ve read the Gallup explanation,” said George Beaufroy. “But I can’t call it convincing.”

“And I’ve read both Mrs. Potts and Mrs. Gallup,” said Lady Judith, “and I felt quite sure they were very clever, and firmly believed in their discovery, but that, till the crack of doom, Will Shakespeare would only mean the Shakespeare of ‘Hamlet’ and ‘Romeo and Juliet’ to the British mind. It is really a convincing proof of the effect of ‘quotations.’”

Everyone laughed. Then the footman entered with *cigarettes* and spirit bottles and syphons, and they all began to play *Bridge*, except myself and Paul D’Eyncourt.

## XV

THE dreariness of Christmas Day was surpassed by the melancholy wretchedness of its successor. Fog and drizzle and bitter wind made town and street and closed shops a mere apology for the festal season. I remained indoors, engaged in the task of transforming my former *cabinet de beauté* into a study for my new secretary. I had, of course, to postpone the purchase of a type-writer until the shops were once more open, but the alterations and arrangements kept me pleasantly occupied until the evening.

Then a curious restlessness took possession of me. I tried to lose myself in Balzac's weird story of the "Peau de Chagrin," which I was reading for the third time, but my thoughts persistently strayed. I kept turning over leaves without grasping their meaning.

Suddenly I found myself reading a certain sentence over and over again: "Women are wont . . . to see chiefly the defects of a man of talent, and the merit of fools."

The words drew themselves out of the page and seemed to compel my attention. I was no novice in the revelations of the "Comédie Humaine." No chance student of its analysis of life, its minute and searching study of character, and the environment that makes character. I had read the series more than once, marvelling at its merciless truth, its dissection of men and women in all their revelations of lust, vice, fraud, greed and self-martyrdom.

The "Magic Skin" was, however, a work apart from the "Comedy." I liked it for its mysticism; its weird

possibility; its masterly analysis of the emotions, and of those temptations that produce emotions.

But I found myself repeating that cynical phrase again and again. Was it true? Do women—through some strange twist of mind—only see the defects of talent—the merit of fools.

I mentally compared the men I had met the previous night; George Beaufroy, the great writer, who had not uttered a word worth remembering; Archey Templeton, whose amusing cynicism and endless chatter had made him so entertaining; and Paul D'Eyncourt, with his wonderful voice, his cool indifference to men, women, and the world in general.

All through those games of Bridge, he had sat by me and talked. He had interested me greatly. Less, perhaps, by what he revealed of himself than by what he chose to conceal. I had some glimpses of his past life. Of a broken career; of pride closely hidden; of the acceptance of duty. Music was his passion. He had once determined to devote his life to its pursuit. But Fate willed otherwise. We had talked of Fate. That mysterious compelling power, for ever thwarting man's desires, for ever bending his will to the shape of its merciless denials.

Some of my own heart's bitterness found an echo in his. My experience had adopted his philosophies by instinct. I had not paused to ask their why or wherefore. He had endeavoured to find reasons for the happening of events. I had accepted the events and rebelled at the reasons. Yet all the time we talked I was conscious of irritation. I felt that he was trying to analyse me. That he drew me on to say things I had not intended to say. That to him I was only a woman who had selected an ignoble career, when she had all the world before her, summed up in one word—liberty. For I had confessed myself free, as far as human ties were concerned and human obligations. But, also, I could *not lay claim to any special talent that would have made me*

independent of present circumstances. I wanted money, and I made no secret of my desire. But I wanted it for its possibilities of rendering life less burdensome. For its aid in bringing into that life the pleasures of art, travel, variety. Is anything more wearisome than routine? Anything more calculated to make a human being into a mere machine whose intelligence is supplied by another force, and whose work is accomplished by sheer mastery of habit?

In my life, as I looked back upon it, there was so much to regret; so much suffering, so much wasted time, energy and opportunity, that I felt hopeless of ever recapturing its possibilities.

I thought of my sudden descent from affluence to the necessity of earning my own bread. I wondered, somewhat bitterly, what any one of my fashionable or titled *clientèle* would have done under similar circumstances. How would they face an existence which, suddenly and without warning, dropped them from the lap of luxury to the feet of poverty. From the possession of houses, carriages, servants, jewels, all the splendour and all the comforts of life to a mere paltry two hundred a year, and even that uncertain, unless supplemented by strenuous individual effort?

Yet this was what had happened to me. This it was that, claiming all my own pity for an irretrievable misfortune, led me to be at once envious and—pitiless. Frankly I confessed it. I had no beauty of mind or character. I was bitter and disillusioned. I had found nothing in my own sex to restore to me the belief in charity accredited to them. I had learnt that few men are capable of an honest friendship for a lonely and unprotected woman. I had learnt that the world reads its own interpretations into the actions of others, and that those actions, however innocent, suffer from the interpretation, and become criminal in effect. Material joys and material things will always rank first in men's minds as motive—or incentive. How, indeed, can it be otherwise, considering that we must all live—and that life is only

valued for its material good. Anything higher or more spiritual belongs to another side of existence. It does not touch the "personal" note. Intellectual exploration into fields of mysticism or spirituality is quite a thing apart from the absolute needs of the body. But the key-note of that body's existence, whether animal or human, is selfishness; just as its first instinct is self-preservation. The effort to *keep* that with which it has been endowed, even though it proclaims the gift worthless.

Great deeds, great heroisms, great renunciations are the impulse of exalted moments; of the spur of rivalry, of the desire for recognition at any cost. They are, therefore, exceptional. Patience and goodness are beautiful possessions, but are they not more the instincts of a special order of human nature than the acquired prize of stunted, stifled, and suffering souls? Some natures are less conscious of responsibility than others. It is more a misfortune than a fault, but the zealous philosopher always punishes misfortunes as the outcome of faults behind them.

The book dropped from my lap on to the floor, and the noise roused me from my long reverie. I picked it up and looked at the clock. It was half-past nine.

I rose lazily from my chair. I was about to ring for Barbe Piccotée and coffee, when, to my surprise, she ushered in—Lady Judith.

"Lady Judith!" I exclaimed.

She came forward. "I've come to pay you another surprise visit. You see I don't apologize. I got tired of sitting at home alone. Paul has gone to the pantomime! Can you fancy him enjoying such an intellectual treat? He and the Ormaroyd people. Gwen has two little boys. That was the excuse. Modern pantomimes are always run for 'grown-ups,' nowadays. The children look upon them as a necessary penance! Well, here I am—you *look as comfy* as ever. Coffee? Yes, I'll have a cup.

No one in my establishment can make such coffee as your old Barbe Piccotée."

She threw off her cloak and seated herself by the fire. I gave my orders, and Barbe withdrew.

"Well—how did you enjoy yourself last night? I saw you got on amazingly with Archey Templeton. Wasn't I right? Isn't he amusing?"

"Very," I said. "I have never heard anyone talk quite like he does."

"Oh! that's only a trick—acquired like any other. He has to live by his wits, and so he cultivates them in a hot-house of artifice. It's as easy to grow epigrams as it is to force asparagus. The highest culture of the present day is only the art of saying foolish things cleverly, and clever things foolishly."

"Does Mr. Templeton really only live by dining out?" I asked. "He told me so. But I didn't know whether to believe him."

"He spoke the truth. His father was Lord Borrodaile, but he died leaving nothing but debts behind him. Estate had to be sold, and Archey, the youngest son, found himself, like Paul, dependent on himself. These are the pleasant little surprises our present aristocracy spring upon heirs expectant. No wonder they have to go to America for help."

"It is very hard on the heirs," I said. "I have a fellow feeling for that sort of misfortune, Lady Judith."

"Of course," she said. "Of course. You have also suffered from reverse of fortune. However, you will have the satisfaction of regaining it, and by means that should appeal to you."

I looked at her inquiringly. "Practising on the vanity of the silly fools who have been the means of robbing you. I presume your husband was built on the approved French pattern."

"Indeed, yes—where sex was concerned."



"Refined pleasures are quite as costly as the other sort," she said, brutally. "Oh! powers above, how I loathe and hate—women!"

The expression of her face was almost inhuman in its passionate vindictiveness. I looked at her with wonder. The real truth of her nature seemed to have sprung into sight, as a tiger springs from an unsuspected hiding-place.

"Why?" I exclaimed, involuntarily.

She calmed herself by an effort, and took the cup of coffee Barbe Piccotée had just brought in.

"Why?" she answered, as the door closed. "For all reasons that were ever given, but for no reason so convincing as that I *know* them. Know them to their heart's core. Know all their possibilities and all their defects; their passions and their pretences; their pettiness and their intrigues; their deceptions, hypocrisy and—limitations. Oh, my dear! don't imagine you are any more perfect than the rest of us. We all await the special moment that is to tempt or try us. If we fall we are still true enough to sex to try and convince our own selves that we are not to blame; only the special circumstance that proved us fallible."

I laughed somewhat bitterly, though her words were after my own heart.

"You are right, I am sure. It is not what we *are*, but what we wish others to *think* we are, that is so important. I know my own faults, believe me, though I don't intend to acknowledge them."

"Of course not. Limitations are the essence of feminine confidence. But all this is beside the mark. I did not come here to discuss sex idiosyncrasies. . . . By the way, you have changed your room. How charming! Did you do that to gain an effect of distance?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course it's only an illusion. But, like *other illusions*, it is preferable to reality."

She lay back and looked into the second room opening out of my little *salon*. It was furnished now as a continuation of the *salon*. At the furthest end I had arranged a mirror and some tall plants above a writing table. A small, rose-shaded lamp was on the table, and by its light the whole of the larger room, where we were sitting, was reflected. In the mirror the effect was a multiplication of rooms, stretching far back into distance.

"I arranged that to-day," I said. "It is for my secretary. I am going to employ one."

"Are you? Who?"

"Oh, really she is the daughter of the old French chemist who makes up my recipes. She has been a great invalid, and so lost her post as type-writer in an office. She is in better health now, and so I thought I would give her some work."

Her keen black eyes swept my face. "Are you telling me this to disprove my assertions?"

I laughed amusedly.

"No, Lady Judith; as far as I am concerned you may say what you please of me, or any other woman. I cannot forget that you have helped me to independence."

"Comparative independence," she corrected.

"Yes, of course. But when one has only a couple of hundred pounds and no prospects, such a turn of Fortune's wheel deserves all one's gratitude."

"Umph! woman's gratitude. I don't reckon on *that*. I explained my reasons partly——"

I gave a quick glance. "Only partly?"

She hesitated. "Yes. I had and have another motive. I want you to be a power in one of the worlds of fashion, as I am—in another."

I still looked enquiry.

"You may have heard——" she began, then hesitated, and looked searchingly at me. "*Have* you heard anything?"

"About you, Lady Judith? Frankly, yes. A great many things."

## Queer Lady Juana

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I laughed somewhat bitterly, though her words were my own heart.

"You are right, I am sure. It is not what we wish others to *think* we are, but what I know my own faults, believe me, they acknowledge them."

"Of course not. Limitations are here to discuss sex idiosyncrasies and have changed your room. How to gain an effect of distance?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course other illusions, it is pre-

## Queer Lady Judas

Her face changed. "Of course. How could it be otherwise? But about my business—have you heard about that?"

"You mean, of course, Judas et Cie."

She nodded.

"Is it true?" I asked, brusquely.

"Perfectly. The woman who carries it on is merely paid by me to do so."

"As I am paid by you in this other—business?"

"Exactly. It suits me to use my money in this fashion. It serves a double purpose. The profits are enormous and—well—I told you I hate women."

"Yet you try to benefit them?"

"Is it a benefit to minister to their follies and their vanities. To draw them closer and more surely, into the net of their own sinful extravagance? To play on their love of admiration, their craze for rivalry. To pit beauty against beauty, and see to what lengths they will go, these courtesans of Society! Why, for sake of a smile from royalty, a word from the favourite *lion* of the hour, a jewel whose sale is chronicled, a gown that no other gown can touch for costliness, the women of to-day will sell their names, their lineage, their bodies, and their souls! Half of these women come to me to be dressed, to borrow money, to have their debts concealed from their husbands. Half of them I could ruin to-morrow, did I insist on payment of my claims. At present I am only amusing myself with seeing how much rope they will require for hanging! An elastic one, so far! Are you wondering why I tell you all this?"

"Yes," I said. "Is it a confidence or merely a recital?"

"It can scarcely be a confidence seeing that all London knows that Lady Judith Vanderbyl—a peer's daughter and a millionaire's wife—chooses to set up a dressmaker's shop in Dover Street. On the other hand it is a confidence of motive. I do not tell my reasons to anyone as a rule. By making you an exception I prove that I believe you will *respect the motive* of the confidence."

"I certainly will," I said.

"I also wish——" Again she paused. I thought she was weighing something in the balance of her mind. Something she desired to say—and yet was uneasy about confessing.

"I wish to impress upon you, Madame Beaudelet, that in *your* business and behind your affairs I also stand as the possessor of motive. To me you are put forward as the principal agent of my scheme. I have allowed you to work it for a month apparently uncontrolled. The reason is obvious. The season is not yet here. The business must be set going in a solid and reputable manner. The people I wish to come to you have not yet come. But they will. You will be the fashion. Not in an advertised and assertive manner, but in an unostentatious and certain one. The stamp of 'speciality' upon your name will also be the stamp of exclusiveness. You have still two clear months before I shall begin to work my side of the business. In those two months I want you to perfect yourself in every method of beauty-manufacture. Leave electrolysis, and chin-straps, and face-masks severely alone. They have their own experts. What you do must be novel; must *seem* to be successful; and, above all, it must be ruinously expensive. That is what the class of clients who come to me expect. It is only what a thing *costs*—be it a jewel, a gown, a complexion, or a man's heart—that seems to them of any importance."

I was silent, turning over her words in my mind, trying to fathom their real meaning. I was in her power to a certain extent. But I had also begun to taste the sweets of my own. I had learnt the difference between a subordinate and an influential position. Between a few chance clients and a fashionable and ever increasing *clientèle*. I had no mind to go back to my first insignificance after so sudden and surprising a change.

"What is it exactly that you mean, Lady Judith?" I asked at last. "Don't be afraid to speak plainly. I'm not inclined to take alarm at frankness."

"I mean," she said, "to work the two most influential methods of influencing women. By power of vanity; by power of dress. I want to get them into my hands, unknown to themselves, and then I will teach them a lesson such as no woman has taught her sex in all the years behind to-day! It is the cherished scheme of my life. It is the object to which I have dedicated my wealth, my time, my ambition, my dead and lonely heart."

Sudden tears glittered in her black, hard eyes. She clasped her hands tightly together "Dead—it is; and lonely it always will be. A woman killed it. A woman left it the seared, blank desert that I know. It is for that woman's sake I have descended into the arena of passionate strife around us. Look at me—" She dropped her hands, and turned her elaborate head and sparkling jewels, to face my speechless surprise. "Look at me. I am old, I am ugly, I am detested, and some people think detestable! I have the power to gratify every wish; I have wealth that a king might envy; and, with it all, I am only the loneliest, saddest, most miserable old woman in all this great Babylon!"

There was a long, painful silence. I could not speak. I saw a sudden tragedy unmasked by those words. I seemed to be looking down, down into the depths of a human soul, where grim patience smiled at martyrdom. Smiled, yet held a sterner purpose waiting for accomplishment behind that smile, and behind that martyrdom.

I recalled chance words I had heard of her. I remembered that story of the woman who had ruined her young son's life, and been the cause of his death. All these things rushed back to my mind now as I looked at that stormy face. The sufferings of youth are tragic, but they are brief. It is the suffering of age that eats like iron into the soul, and lays it waste and desolate. I had seen sorrow and suffering and remorse. I had had an experience sharp and pain-set. But I had never seen and never realized the *baneful effects* of human misery as I now realized them.

Here love and loss spoke out their savage sense of personal deprivation. Their intense and passionate egoism, their confession that, wanting one thing only, and met by its denial, all else was valueless.

A great pity swept over me for this strange and heart-crushed woman. To me she revealed both cause and effect. She was no exaggeration of human misery, but its explanation. With so much in her hands and in her power she could find nothing to comfort her. Nothing to bring forgetfulness. The woman's tragedy was faced by the woman's despair, and that despair had lit the fires of vengeance.

I knew now what she meant. I realized all she had done and all she wished to do. I knew by intuition in what way I could aid her, and for what reasons she desired that aid. And though I shrank from a dishonouring contract, I saw that my own future had been skilfully enwoven with her plans. That if I failed to fall in with them, I should have to accept Cinderella's fate. To go back to attic and broomstick and cinders, and there sit lamenting the whim of the fairy godmother, and my own folly in disobeying it.

"Have you made up your mind?" she asked at last. "Or have my explanations not been clear enough?"

I felt my face grow hot. I was conscious of a sudden stifling sensation.

"I believe—I think I understand," I stammered. "You wish me to aid you in encouraging a—a certain class of women in their extravagance? I am to promise them beauty, on certain conditions."

"Exactly. The more costly those conditions the better."

"But they won't be content with promises, and I have told you——"

"They will be perfectly content if you make them *look* beautiful by any means. The woman who desires a thing intensely is easily convinced that she is on the high road to possessing it. Your promises will be their mirage. They will always see the picture shining and glittering before

them. Nothing will convince them that it is only—a picture. Trust me, child, I know my sex core through; such of them as I shall send to you, and expect you to play on the line of vanity. They, after all, are the only ones who enter into my scheme. For whom I have befriended you."

I looked at her doubtfully. "You are perfectly candid? There is nothing behind all this. Nothing, I mean, that's absolutely—base?"

"Why should you think so?"

"I don't know," I said. "Your words conveyed a hint of purpose. I imagined there might be some special person against whom I was to direct my attentions."

A queer, crooked smile contorted her face.

"If there is," she said, "you will not know her."

"Then how—how——"

"The hour will bring its own illumination. Believe me, I shall not ask a very great sacrifice on your part. Only the paving of the way to my purpose. A woman who sacrifices everything on the altar of her vanity, deserves to suffer for and through that vanity. Your conscience will acquit you once you are face to face with that superb and sensual egoism."

"I have not met her yet—this woman?"

"No," she said, quickly, "and I am curious to see if instinct will speak out her identity when you *do* meet her. Rest assured you will only be a fashionable caprice in her eyes. A means to an end."

"What end?" I exclaimed, involuntarily,

Her eyes flashed. "My end—" she said. "Mine!"



## XVI

I COULD not speak. The bald ineffectiveness of words came fully home to me, in that psychological moment when a human soul suddenly tore aside its veil of disguise, and showed me the darkness and misery behind.

I remained silent; looking at that strangely ugly face, those quivering lips, and fierce, compelling eyes. They spoke tragedy and suffering of no common order. They spoke also an uglier thing. The desire for revenge. The jealous hatred of a personal loveliness denied to herself, and working out a terrible wrong. It seemed to me awful that a human will should bring all its weight of malice and its power of harm to bear on another entity. Should concentrate energy and desire on the power of harm alone. But everyone read in the science of psychology knows that the feminine mind offers little resistance to the passions. The balance of will is easily outweighed by emotion. Tangled amidst the threads of existence is all the complex strife of feelings that make the sum of that existence. At one period the mind seizes on one special object; its denial or its gratification may be alike harmful. But in claiming it all the force of will comes into action, and resistance is but an added incentive to desire.

It seemed to me that this strange woman had thrown every energy of life into some such desire. Her mind was a turbid atmosphere, in which shone but one clear flame. The flame of an ever-burning vengeance. Was it only chance that had sent me across its path? Was my mental passivity the result of previous sufferings, or the mere submission to a will-force, strong, and merciless, and overmastering, such as hers?

I could not tell. I only knew that she held me dumb, and fascinated, as much by her strange scheme as by her self-revelation.

"Are you ever going to speak?" she said, hoarsely.

I started. "I—I beg your pardon. I had lost myself in a mental tangle. What do you wish me to say, Lady Judith?"

"Simply that you will leave yourself in my hands—a passive agent. It is not possible to make a holocaust of all the crime, and lust, and immorality, and vanity, and debauchery that run riot in Society, but at least I may light one bonfire that will terrify them by its illumination."

"Its revelation, I suppose you mean."

"Yes—if you prefer the word."

"And my assistance," I said, "is to be that of your agent?"

"Exactly. I have placed you in a prominent position. You have an assured income and no risks. With the coming season you will understand more fully the meaning of success. A success that will affect you socially as well as pecuniarily."

"How—socially?" I asked.

"Because with *one* name you may resume social existence. People can be very blind when their own interests may be served by such blindness. Do you think for one moment that the highest social authorities of the day would attempt to associate *me* with a dressmaker's business? Not they. Even though they know they are in my debt to the tune of thousands, and that I hold enough of their paper to cover the hoardings of London!"

She laughed brutally, and rose from her chair and stood leaning against the low mantelshelf. For a moment I watched her, fascinated and subdued. My mental powers had so long been in a state of protracted resistance that it was almost a relief to bow in submission to a stronger will.

"I—I am not sure that I understand you, Lady Judith. *But perhaps it is not necessary.*"

"No," she said, "it is not; and I hate explanations."

"You said something about social benefits that might accrue to me?"

"Yes. Have you ambitions in that line? Is there any special house whose *entrée* you desire? I hold a key that opens most. Wealth—and the possession of strange secrets."

"Society holds no tempting for me," I said. "I have no illusions; neither am I a novice in the ways of the world. Of course, men and women are interesting. They serve to illustrate the meanings of life; but on closer acquaintance—"

"Have you ever loved?"

"Never," I said, candidly. "I have never come across any man for whom I felt that sort of attraction which leads to self-surrender. I like intelligent men—interesting men. But they are rarely lovable. Besides, really and truly, love seems to me a species of delusion; an insanity. The most hot-headed victims of the 'tender passion' prove the readiest to recover and deny its durability."

"There is only one sort of love that holds a woman in bondage," said Lady Judith. "It is that of motherhood."

Her face changed. A quiver of emotion broke up its hardness. But she subdued it instantly.

"Of that also—I know nothing," I said, sadly. "But some of these women are mothers, and yet their obligations seem only to extend to hired attendants and fancy-dress costumes for their children. They fill me with curiosity and amazement, these 'great ladies,' who come to my rooms. The desire to learn why they lead such lives, or whether they are fit to live any other?"

"They are not," she said, brusquely. "Take them away to-morrow from their eternal round of clubs, of visiting, dressing, scandalizing, intriguing, gambling, flirting, and spending money, and they would be as lost souls crying for their Paradise. Their bodies are their idols; their own *bien être*, their sole idea of happiness. They are absolutely unscrupulous where their own desires are concerned."

Their financial embarrassments are the only things that ever give them an uneasy moment, because they know that poverty or a 'smash up' would bar every gate against them."

"And such is the life that the poor envy, and the middle-class worship, and the philosopher scorns, and the preacher holds up to contempt!"

"Yes," she said, with a grim little smile. "I was born into it. I suppose I ought to know. Providence must be the possessor of a keen sense of irony. More especially when a special black sheep offers an altar-cloth, or a piece of plate, or opens a church bazaar, by way of atonement for breaking every sin in the Decalogue?"

I sighed wearily. "Is there such a thing as Providence, do you think? Isn't the name a mere synonym on men's tongues for certain benefits that befall themselves—or certain ills that befall their neighbours?"

"You don't believe in Divine prerogatives?"

"I believe in some controlling influence that affects human destinies. But its working is so capricious, so involved, and so invariably disastrous, that I would scarcely call it Divine."

"It is always Divine when things go well with us," she said, bitterly. "When the love we crave, and the position we desire, and the ambition we covet are given into our hands. But when the love is falsified, and the position denied, and the ambition crossed, we are ready enough to cry out on a scheme of injustice that began with creating us unasked, and will end in destroying us in a similar manner."

"Yet if, after all, there *were* a purpose behind?" I said, wistfully.

"It is man's inordinate vanity that has led him to suppose he was created specially for some great purpose in the scheme of Creation! He perpetually forgets that he *was* the last agenesis to enter into that scheme. And, even *were it otherwise*, I fail to see that he has any reason to be

proud of what he has accomplished. Civilization has bred the vices of the Universe. Christianity has proved but a blasphemous excuse for wholesale murder and aggrandizement. The Bible in one hand, and a gun in the other, has been the approved method of transmitting our vices to the primitive savage, who, at least, had a wholesome body before his white enemy taught him to poison it with vile drinks and adulterated foods! But there, child, I shall talk all night at this rate, and I am keeping you up. I hope your rest has done you good. You re-open to-morrow?"

"Yes," I said. "I have several names down."

"Even country house-parties can't withstand the magic call of the beauty-doctor! My dear woman, believe me when I tell you that in all ages, and from all ages, and so to the end of Time, there will never be so strong and so tyrannical a power as the Vanity of Woman! Trade on that, and you have fortune and favour at your feet! Now—good-night."

She held out her hand, I gave her mine, and we stood for a moment looking into each other's face.

"We understand one another, I think," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Long after the door had closed I remained there looking into the dying embers; lost in a maze of reflections and conjecture.

Did I understand her—or she me? Were we not both playing a game, and playing it guardedly, and with other motives than merely the play. I stood to her in the light of a tool. Her hand was to make me execute the design in her mind.

The soul that had looked out of her eyes was a tortured, haggard, ravening force. I had been appalled by its misery, and afraid at its despair. I had permitted myself to fall in with her scheme, without any consideration of where and to what lengths it might lead me. Yet now I asked myself whether I was prepared to be unscrupulous? To act a

part to these women who placed themselves so trustingly in my hands. Who were confidential, and even friendly. Vain and foolish and wordly they were; living the lives of their set, and bounded by its limitations. Yet if at the core of one heart lay the germ of something better, did not that redeem the Eternal Woman—the sex exponent, from the crowd of lower individualities?

Lady Judith classed the crowd into one definition. She went so far ahead of my own cynicism that she left me with a cloak of charity about my shoulders. I felt that her wrongs must, indeed, be very deep and very bitter; but yet it seemed hardly fair to revenge herself on the many for the sins of one. And who was that one?

Curiosity awoke and tormented me as I remembered stories and fragments linking her with some bygone tragedy. Whoever the woman was, she could not be young. Neither had she, as yet, paid me a visit. But my queer patroness had confidently predicted that she would do so. Even then I could not clearly foresee how I was to help her scheme of revenge. Did she mean me to draw her victims into a fresh net of debt and obligations. Was I to play Shylock to her female Antonios? I remembered those words about "paper." Enough, so she had said, to cover the hoardings of London. This was an outcome of one business. Did she intend to pursue the same schemes, *sub rosa*, with my name and my profession as cover?

Her hints had been vague; yet to me they seemed sufficiently clear, now I recalled them. Well, there was no use in anticipating trouble, or annoyance. They would come no doubt. I was self-committed to follow out her instructions when the day and the hour came for issuing them. Until then—I was merely Madame Beaufort, Skin Specialist and Professor of Hygienic Massage, ——— Street, Hanover Square.

I turned to switch off the lights, pausing an instant to *survey once more* that ingenious effect of distance, caused by

the rearrangement of my rooms. In the mirror I saw myself reflected, and yet with something unfamiliar about the reflection. I looked older, sterner, more troubled.

"I hope I am not going to *feel* things as I used to do," I thought; and stood there, with my hand upon the electric button, remembering other nights and times when that face and figure had represented tragedy—and pain. "How queer life is. It seems but the other day I was in Paris—in my own house; and now it is London, and hard work, and queer histories. But it is still—women. Always women. How they have come into my life. How they have hurt it—and me. How I have hated and despised them; false friends and treacherous enemies! And yet if I could meet one—but *one* who was capable of proving that feminine virtues are not a mere poet's fable, I would recant my opinions and, for sake of her, forgive all others."

With the morning came the stir of life in the streets; a cessation of the dreary Sundaydom that marks all English holidays. I walked to my business through a cleaner atmosphere, and at eleven o'clock was ready to receive a new client who had made an appointment. She was going out to India she told me. Her husband had an important Government appointment in Calcutta. She was extremely anxious about her complexion, and prepared to spend a good deal of money on its renovation. She threw a few side-lights on Indian Society. The meanness of certain officials' wives, and the ridiculous airs of others. The incessant craze for amusement, and the absolute impossibility of domestic life, or rational enjoyment in such a climate and amidst such surroundings.

To me it seemed very humiliating that human beings should be such slaves to their environment, and to that everlasting fear of what their neighbours will say if they dare to strike out a line of independence.

But I listened with pretended sympathy. I also took a large and expensive order from her, by way of proving that

she at least was no exception to the slavery of vanity in any climate, and amidst any surroundings!

The hours filled up until dusk. I and my assistant were just indulging in tea when, to my surprise, Lady Ormaroyd rushed in.

"Oh! *have* you half-an-hour to spare?" she entreated. "No, not you, Miss Audrey, I want Madame Beaufilet. She has sadly neglected me of late. Shall I go into No. 1 room? No, don't hurry over your tea, I can wait. But mind you come yourself. You will—really?"

I laughed at her anxiety. "Certainly. In two or three minutes."

She rustled into the toilet-room, knocking over a chair with her long train, and chattering all the time through the open door.

"This is the most delicious place I was ever in. The warmth, the colour, the lovely scents. Where do you get such perfumes? I declare I'd like to board and lodge here by the week or month. There's a suggestion for you, Madame Beaufilet. Paying guests and treatment combined. Only they'd be sure to quarrel if you had no men. Women always do; even at Bridge. A female Bridge party is a revelation in bad language and unsuppressed temper. I wonder whether men snarl over cards at their clubs. Talking of clubs, I've just put my name up for that new one in Park Lane. Arts and Sciences or something. I don't know anything about Science, but I'm all Art, as you know, so I thought I ought to join. It's to be very select, and only women who can do something are to be admitted. Nationality no object. They're to have debates; and one can ask men to dine or lunch, and there's a perfectly divine smoking-room looking right over the park. I'll take you there one day, if you're very good and make me look charming to-night. I'm dining at the Carlton with a party, and that queer mystic *creature*, Serge Patoff, is to be there. You've heard of him,



of course? Reads your mind and your future by divination. Electric sympathy or something. He told Lady Alcester all about her little dog's illness and death. It was quite true; and ever since she's worn mourning and only her pearls. She's quite taken Patoff up. She's bringing him to-night. I'm dying to meet him. Russian, or is it Polish? One never knows. But now tell me about yourself. How are you getting on? Of course, you're talked about everywhere. People say this is on too grand a scale to last. Scandal?— Oh, yes. A little. What can you expect? A pretty woman, and then to set up in *this* style. But it makes everyone so anxious to come for a treatment. And when they don't see you yourself, they are simply horrid. Just as if a woman *could* attend personally to a dozen people. However, I tell them it's the *rarest* thing to get you to oneself. Must make special appointments. Do they?"

"A great many are beginning to do that."

"Ah! that's my advice. A rolling stone rolls all the moss. Not that *that* has anything to do with advice; but there's a proverb about it, isn't there? And, talking of proverbs, who persuaded Lady Ju to alter her hair? What an improvement! Marvellous! She'll make white hair quite fashionable. We can always call it *poudre* can't we? So *petit Trianon*, and all that. They were just as bad then as we are now, all those naughty kings and princes, and those dear Pompadours and people. But talking of Pompadours, I'm sure you persuaded Lady Ju, didn't you?"

"No," I said; "I merely suggested that it's a mistake for women to think dyed hair makes them look youthful."

"Oh, but, my dear, it *does*! Nothing is so horribly ageing as grey hairs."

"Don't you think that Nature is wise enough to tone down our hair to our appearance as time goes on?"

"Nature, *wise*! What heresy! Why, Nature is the greatest blunderer in all the Universe! She is crude, she

is cruel, she is callous ; and she is for ever at war with what we admire or desire."

" Perhaps—" I said, " that is why we have given her the feminine gender."

## XVII

"SOMEONE awaits madame," said Barbe Piccotée, when I opened the outer door of my flat. "A lady, young, pale; of a delicacy to be wondered at. She has not announced herself. She says madame has expected her."

I nodded. I guessed it was Julie Thibaud who had come

I found her sitting by the fire. She looked extraordinarily fragile, as Barbe had said. She wore a dark coat and skirt, and a neat sailor hat. The pallor of her cheeks showed up her large dark eyes and the colour of her lips. They were a livid, unhealthy red. The sight of them affected me curiously. They seemed as a bleeding wound in the dead whiteness of that strange, unyouthful face. I greeted her hurriedly as I took off my hat.

"I hardly thought you would have come to-day. Are you sure you are strong enough? . . . And the type-writer has not arrived."

She looked round the room. "How pretty it all is. I have never seen anything so perfect."

I laughed, with some amusement. "You cannot have seen many London houses then! Why this is a mere nutshell. A *bonbonnière* of cheap effects! But look: this is your domain."

I switched on the light and showed her the inner room. Its writing-table and appointments; its stock of reference books and writing-paper; its comfortable chairs.

Her eyes glowed. "How charming! How happy I shall be. It is so different from that horrible office. Can't

I begin to-night. I do so want to be of some use. You have been so good to father and myself."

She seemed transformed from the sickly, pettish invalid. She moved to and fro, giving quick, interested looks at the different things; touching a book, a vase of flowers, an ornament.

"Begin to-night?" I echoed. "But you would have to write, not type."

"I don't mind. I write a good, plain hand. And it will be something to do."

I glanced at the clock. There was an hour before dinner. We might get through a good deal of correspondence by that time.

I took out a bundle of letters that I had brought from my business premises. Some were still unopened. I threw them down on the table. "Wait until I have changed my gown," I said, "and then I'll come and dictate."

When I returned she was still standing there; still looking at the table, and the paper, and the pile of letters. I touched her arm. She started violently.

"What are you dreaming about?" I said.

A wave of colour swept over the haggard young face. "I—I was only thinking——"

"Well, sit down, and write as I dictate. That's all addressed paper there."

"Not this address?" she said, drawing some sheets from the letter-rack.

"Oh, no. I don't give clients my private address. That would never do. Now, are you ready?"

While she wrote, I watched her. She held for me a curious pathological interest. She was young—yet so old. Ill—yet without a pronounced disease. Melancholy—with no apparent reason for unhappiness. And to all life and to all affection she seemed indifferent.

Her hands were very thin, but white and well-shaped. *She wrote rapidly and distinctly, and her orthography was*

correct. In less than an hour all the letters were answered and placed ready for post. Then she leant back in her chair, lifted her arms, and yawned heavily.

"Why, Julie!" I exclaimed, "are you so fatigued?"

"I—I beg your pardon, madame. I am subject to these fits"—(she tried to smother another yawn)—"it is weakness."

"Or want of food," I said, quickly. "Girls of your age imagine they can live on buns and tea. It's nonsense. A good mutton chop——"

She shuddered "Oh, madame, *please!* I hate meat. I never touch it."

"But that's nonsense! No wonder you are so pale."

"Am I?" She lifted her head and looked at herself in the glass. Even as she did so another yawn seized her, and the sight of that red, gaping mouth annoyed me so that I rose quickly from my chair.

"I'll send you some food," I said. "Do you like soup?"

"Yes, madame."

"Very well. Sit there and look over the papers for a few minutes."

She began to murmur apologies, to beg me not to trouble; but the words were smothered and indistinct. I left her and closed the door, with a distinct sense of irritation. I called to Barbe, and bade her take a cup of soup, a roll, and a glass of wine to the girl, explaining that she was my secretary. The old woman promised compliance, and I remained in my own little *salon*. But even through the closed door, I could hear those prolonged dreadful yawns; I could not help picturing the gaping mouth and curiously relaxed frame of the girl as the fit seized her.

"It is awful, it is a sort of illness," I said to myself. And once again my suspicions wandered into that queer channel of a hospital experience; of cases that had puzzled doctors. Of queer contorted phases of the mind acting on the body, and producing results, monstrous as are some tropical plants, evil as a hidden vice. Was this girl the victim of

some such obsession of the senses? Had she been tempted by the poison of an insidious thought, and yielded herself as a slave to a taskmaster.

With the disgust of the suspicion there sprang up in my mind an almost morbid curiosity to confirm it. The prompting did not proceed from any sentiment—from any liking for the girl; rather the reverse. But for all that it was very strong.

It carried me to the gates of decision. It sent me back to that room, though the excuse of seeing if she had taken the soup was on my lips. But I had no need to ask. It stood on the tray untasted. But she had drunk the wine; and now her face wore a bright, unhealthy flush, and her eyes were glittering, as if in fever.

She rose at my entrance, and began to fumble with the buttons of her jacket.

"I must be going home, madame," she said. "Am I to post those letters for you?"

"That would take you out of your way," I said. "Never mind. I can give them to the hall porter. But—do you wish very much to go home? Because I should like to have a talk with you. Can you wait until I have finished dinner?"

"If you wish—of course, I can wait. Only—"

"Only you are tired? Well, have a sleep."

"A sleep, madame?"

"Surely yawning is a sign of sleepiness. Take off your hat and coat, and sleep in that chair."

I pointed to a low cane chair, comfortably cushioned. She turned very pale.

"If—if you would not mind lowering the light."

"I can't lower electric light," I said; "it must be either on or off. No half measures. But if you have a preference for darkness—why, it is at your service."

"Thank you, madame. You are very kind."

She laid aside her hat, and then seated herself in the chair, and leant back with closed eyes. I moved away and turned off the light.

"Is she then ill; the poor, delicate one?" questioned Barbe, bringing in my own repast a few moments later.

"No, only tired. She has gone to sleep."

"But, how strange—and all of the dark, too! Is it thus that one works when employed by madame? My faith, then! It is of a certainty that there will not be much accomplished."

"She has done all I require for this evening, Barbe," I said. "But make the coffee extra strong, will you? She—the young lady there—remains on for an hour or two after dinner."

"Madame shall have the *café noir*, if she pleases."

I nodded. "Yes; and now bring to me that book on the table by the window. The little book in the green cover."

She brought it and laid it beside my plate.

"I have heard one should not read when one makes to dine. It is not good for the digestion. For the part of me, I am happy that to read or to write is unknown. One succeeds all the same. It has not happened that I seek the service without success, or that I make not my *plat* or my *soufflé* with a skill to be commended? I have had the good fortune to please madame; and here, though we are in so *triste* a country, I bring to her the comforts of the *cuisine*."

"Indeed you do," I said; "and I am grateful to you, Barbe."

"Oh! That! There is no need for madame to say such a thing. She has been my benefactress; my best of all friends. I am grateful. I do not forget those times in Paris."

She lifted the corner of her snowy apron to her eyes; and I, disliking sentiment as much as expressed gratitude, bade

## Queer Lady Judas

her depart and bring me my outlet, with the renowned sauce that no *chef* could prepare more skilfully.

I did not hurry over my meal; and, despite Barbe's advice, I studied the contents of the little green volume even while discussing her culinary delicacies.

What it told me was of too varied and uncertain a character to quite assure my suspicions. On the other hand I could not dismiss them as improbable. From time to time I lifted my head and listened intently for a sound from that inner room. There was none. Not the faintest rustle or movement. I wondered if the girl was asleep. Surely she could not be so absolutely still unless that were the case.

I bade Barbe remove the things at last, and then took out a box of cigarettes, and drew a small table in front of the fire for coffee. With some regard for the strange girl's dislike of bright lights, I left one only—the tall, shaded lamp in the corner.

Then, when the coffee was brought in, I called to her softly.

There was no response.

"She must be asleep," I thought, and crossed to the door and opened it with as little noise as possible.

The instant I did so, she sprang from her chair with a loud, startled cry.

"It is only I, Julie," I said.

She stammered an apology. "My senses are confused. I believe I was dreaming——"

I turned on the light and gathered up the letters from their tray.

"I am sorry I disturbed your sleep," I said. "But it is nearly nine o'clock, and at ten I always go to bed when I can. Will you come into the next room and have some coffee?"

I looked at her. Her face had colour now, and though her hair was rough and tumbled, she looked younger, more *alive*, than when she had come in that evening.



Without a word she followed me.

I gave the letters to Barbe Piccotée, and told her not to disturb us unless I rang. Then I went back to my usual chair by the fire, and bade the girl seat herself on the one opposite me. "And you must drink that coffee," I said. "You are no true Frenchwoman, if it doesn't appeal to you in that state. I always think milk spoils it."

She took the cup mechanically.

"Oh—put sugar in!" I exclaimed.

"I—I beg your pardon. I'm not used to it you see."

"Doesn't your father take coffee?" I asked in surprise.

"Oh, yes, but I—I don't care about it—often."

"What *do* you care about?" I asked, bluntly.

She gave me a quick, furtive look. Then dropped her eyes.

"I—I don't know!" she said.

I bent forward and lit my cigarette. The action brought my face nearer her own. "Julie," I said sternly. "What *is* the matter with you? Why are you so different from other girls?"

She started. A sort of quiver went over her white face.

"Am I different. How?"

"In many ways. You seem to have no interests, no affection; no hobbies or pastimes, no strong tastes or inclinations. Given that your health is not all it should be, there is still no adequate reason for such depression; for fluctuating spirits, exhaustion, weakness. Your father adores you. Your home is at least comfortable, and your needs are all supplied. It puzzles me that you should seem so desperately unhappy. I wish you would trust me. I wish you would tell me the truth."

She shivered so violently that some of the coffee was spilt. A grey shadow crossed her face, and her lips began to quiver with a sort of noiseless laughter.

The effect was horrible. "I am not unhappy—now," she said, "and the depression was owing to my health. You know that."

"Yes, I know it. But why should your health have given way so suddenly? I am asking you for the truth."

She gulped down the coffee and set her cup aside. She looked at me, and then round the room.

"It is surely my own concern," she said, sulkily.

"No, it is not," I answered. "It is the concern of your father who loves you, of any friend who takes an interest in you. Therefore it is my concern since you are in my employment."

She looked alarmed. "Are you afraid I shall not be able to do your work, madame? If so——"

She half rose from her chair, hesitated, and then dropped back into it. The action and the look on her face furnished me with another clue. They spoke mental more than bodily weakness.

"If so," she went on gloomily, "it would be kinder to say so before——"

"Before what?"

"I was going to say before I get used to the coming here—or your kindness."

"Set your mind at rest. I am not going to dismiss you without a fair trial. For one reason you interest me——"

"I?" She lifted her face, grown suddenly haggard and wan.

"Yes. You, or rather your illness—let us call it that. Do you know, I was once in a hospital studying as a nurse; and while there I saw many curious complaints and maladies and—people."

She sat up with sudden animation. I thought she was going to speak, but she did not.

"One," I went on slowly, "was the case of a young girl who seemed to be dying; no one knew what ailed her. The doctors were puzzled. They could not diagnose any special disease. But at last the truth came out: she was a *morphineuse*."

*Julie sat perfectly still. Not a muscle of her face moved.*

"Perhaps," I said, "you don't know what that means. I will explain."

She neither spoke nor looked at me. A block of wood could not have appeared more inanimate.

"In Paris," I said, "there are numbers of people—men and women—who take drugs. Some take one sort; some another. The principle favourites are morphia and cocaine. I believe morphia is the worst. It engenders a sort of madness. It is degrading and it is deadly. At first the effect is rather pleasant. Why they begin is always more or less of a puzzle. It is either from morbid curiosity or to kill pain, or to distract thought. But, in any case, once they *do* begin it seems almost impossible to stop."

I lit a fresh cigarette. Her eyes were on the fire. I could not tell whether I had mastered her attention. Her face was absolutely expressionless.

"I studied the case of that girl with deep interest," I continued. "The more so, as I was one of the nurses she tried to bribe to buy her the stuff. It is always a little difficult to get. The law ought to make it impossible unless a doctor orders it."

"How—how did she use it?" asked Julie, suddenly.

"Injected it—and she was so artful that no one could find out where she hid the syringe."

An odd little smile crept to the girl's lips. She suddenly nestled back against the cushions, and looked at me with alert, interested eyes.

"She was clever enough to hide it—even there?"

"Yes," I said. "But I found it—and I cured her."

"Cured her! I thought you said it was hopeless?"

"That depends on how long the habit has existed, and the strength—or weakness—of the victim's will."

"Tell me the rest. . . . How did you cure her? Did it take long?"

"Not very long, because she was anxious to be cured. She had formed an attachment for a young doctor at this

same hospital. He and I were good friends. Between us we broke down the craving, and built up her moral strength. She was sent home cured. She is now married."

"But if there had been no incentive; if she had been weak and wretched and alone——"

"Are you all that, Julie?"

She started. "I—but no madame; of course not. We were speaking of this French girl, were we not?"

"I was thinking of you," I said. "For you remind me strangely of her."

She looked at me in a dazed, half-frightened way. Then she lifted her hands to her face as if to hide it. I heard her sob.

I rose quickly and crossed to her side. "You poor child," I said. "Won't you trust me now that I know your secret? Let me help you to conquer it."

She made no answer; only sobbed convulsively. "Oh, I can't! I can't! I *can't*!" she moaned. "It's too late."

"Nonsense," I said. "It's never too late. Besides, think what it will mean if you persist. Think of your father, and how he loves you. Think of life—the woman's life that may be yours. What insane fancy is it that makes you sacrifice health, youth, looks, self-respect, possible happiness, just for a few moments' gratification? Why, it's worse than—drunkenness."

She stopped crying with the same dreadful suddenness that she had commenced it.

"It was all through Ada," she said, passionately. "That young man taught her. He was dreadful. He had done it for years, and was able to keep himself under control, and he loved to teach others. His friends all——"

My eyes fell on the green book. What it had told me of the curious crazes and developments of drug-insanity was being verified.

"All his friends were as bad," she went on. "There was *a regular set* of them; and the girls they kept, nearly all

took something; or else used the hypodermic injections. Ada tried it on me for fun. At first I was horribly ill. Then——”

She broke off in a sudden, jerky way.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you. I don’t want to tell you. There’s nothing to be done; it’s gone too far. Besides, no one on earth would induce me to give it up now.”

“Oh! you mustn’t say that. I know it’s hard and painful. But wouldn’t you rather bear a little pain now than turn into a hopeless mad-woman; a creature who had to be shut away from everyone except those as mad as herself.”

“Is that—is that the end,” she asked, in a hoarse and broken voice.

“Yes,” I said. “But you are a long way from that end. You shall not reach it if I can help you. Only you must promise to assist me. Think of what life might mean. Think of your father and how he loves you——”

She wrung her hands wildly.

“If I could. Oh! if I only—only could.”

“Look at me,” I said, suddenly. “My will is stronger than yours.”

I pressed my hand heavily on her shoulder. I forced her to look into my eyes. I brought every force and energy of mine to break down the weak barriers of her enfeebled mind; as she ceased to resist, the more I dominated.

When her eyes closed, and she seemed about to sleep, I put the question I had determined to put. Feebly and reluctantly she groped about with those weak, thin hands. Then from the bosom of her gown she took out a little case.

I seized it.

“Come to me when you want it,” I said. “I am not going to force you away from the poison at once. But promise that from this moment you will not use the stuff unknown to me.”

"I promise," she gasped. "Now let me go."

I released her. As I did so there came a knock at the door.

Barbe spoke.

"It is M'sieur, the father of mademoiselle, who arrives and asks if mademoiselle has left, or is still to the commands of madame?"

"She is just coming home," I said. "Ask Monsieur Thibaud to enter."

## XVIII

WHEN it was all over and they had gone, and the flat was shut up for the night, I found that all inclination for sleep had left me. I was so wide-awake, my faculties were so alert, that it would have given me far greater pleasure to dress and go for a long walk than to pace my room in a dressing-gown. Here again lay the handicap of womanhood, an embargo on freedom of action for fear of—results; midnight results; and unprotection in a civilized country; in a city that held itself as pattern to the whole world!

I found myself laughing without consciousness of mirth, and it annoyed me; for I prided myself on keeping a strong hold over all that battery of nerves, with its tricks and vagaries, which constitutes the temperament of women. I checked my laughter and took a dive down into motives. The motives that had first interested me in this girl, and then led me to assume a position of authority. There was no adequate reason. There seemed only an enormous amount of responsibility and annoyance to be derived from it. And yet, because of a psychological interest in a human entity as a "case," in feminine artifice as a study, in feminine weakness as an inheritance of Eden, I knew that I should put all my will-force and my moral suasion into saving this silly creature from the effects of her vice.

I took up the little case from the mantelshelf and lost myself in conjectures as to how and why human beings become the slave of diseased sensibilities. Set themselves in blind wilfulness to destroy what has issued fresh and healthy and beautiful from the Mint of Creation. Try by every abnormal and devilish method to blunt purity, to strip

cleanliness of its meaning, to brutalise the body and debase the mind?

It seemed very strange, almost as strange as the Immobility that watched their pranks, and allowed them to exist and to victimize their own victims. What scenes I had witnessed in those three years of hospital work. What disillusionings; what self-torment; what martyrdom of tortured bodies for ever striving to believe that Life—bare life—was still enviable. That death alone was monstrous, a thing of terror and fierce nightmares, against whose power and nameless horrors the paralysed force of will strove unavailingly.

Even amidst all this I had asked for Truth, and sought for Truth. Always that. The inner meaning—the real motive; the deep-hidden secret that is *the Man or the Woman*, and that hugs its secrecy to the very confines of Eternity.

I thought of my strange friend. That cold, saturnine man, so clever—and most people said, so callous. For him—as for myself the surface meant so little. A clever mechanic can manufacture a beautiful clock-case, but it is the works—the springs, the mechanism, that mean the timepiece. So with Jules Gautier. The mechanism of the mind—of feeling—of desire—of fanaticism, were all-important. He strove after realities, yet confessed they but led him to a closed gate. The *meaning* of human existence, with all its extraordinary development of cruelty and selfishness—its fetish worship, its blind idolatry of wealth and power, its ever-constant endeavour to pacificate a god-head, that every action of life disclaims—all these things so old—so new—so unalterable, were an inexplicable mystery.

To him, as to all thinkers and students of human nature, the channels of thought led only to that vast, deep sea—where infinite denial meets finite demand. Dark, cold, fathomless, its waters stretch from a known to an unknown shore. And there, waiting amidst Eternal loneliness, sits *that grim ferryman* whose summons all must obey!



I had heard that summons given, and seen it obeyed so often; and still it held for me an overwhelming interest. When my hands touched velvet skins, when hues of peach and rose bloomed in lovely insolence beneath them, I remembered those narrow white beds of the hospital ward. I knew that—be my lady ever so fair, so rich, so confident—the merest accident, the failure of an instant's precaution, the senseless ravaging of hosts of poisonous *bacilli* would take the bloom and beauty from her face, and thin her tresses, and waste her form, and leave her as countless others were left, a solitary, insignificant claimant of a little spot of earth; green turf, or marble slab—what matters it when one has ceased "To Be."

And yet, with all this knowledge, how humanity plays at blindfolding itself! The very case I held in my hand—the little phial of dark fluid, that tiny needle in its holder—this apparent insignificance was but another proof of criminal folly.

To such a pitch had civilization arrived that, with all good gifts of life and wealth at its disposal, it must needs fly to abnormal vices, filthy sins, sensual degradation of past centuries, for its excitement or pleasure.

I recalled those words of Julie Thibaud. A set of men, young and wealthy (or the music halls would not have served as harems), given up to this vice of drugs. Not only that, but responsible for dragging their harem into the same criminal degradation.

I closed the case and locked it away in a drawer. It had been eloquent long enough. It had meant a self-imposed task, for which I was almost regretful. I knew the difficulties, the scenes, the ingratitude that awaited me, and all for what? For sake of a moment's pity. Or—was it for sake of one honest, humble soul that had said, "*Le bon Dieu*, He knows how much we are able to suffer; more He gives not to us."

Was I interfering with this province of *le bon Dieu*, because I had determined to save the child for sake of the father?

I wondered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before I left for business Julie Thibaud was round and clamouring to see me.

I had half expected such a result, though I had asked her father to give her a sleeping draught when she went home.

She looked frightfully ill and haggard. The expression in her eyes was dreadful. I looked at her sternly. Her face and hands were unwashed, her hair rough and untidy. Her whole appearance spoke out the physical degradation that was the present phase of her vice.

"I have come for it. I—I can't bear this agony! You promised . . . Madame, you promised——"

Her voice rose shrilly.

"Silence," I said. "Answer my questions. Have you slept at all?"

"An hour or two. But the waking . . . Oh, madame, I implore you, pity me. Give me back my case."

"No," I said. "But you shall have a small dose. Only first go into the bath-room and have a warm bath. I will put something into the water that will soothe you and stop this trembling. Go!"

She entreated for the injection first. But I would not listen. I took her arm and led her to the bath-room, and myself turned on the water and threw in the medicaments. "Now," I said, "get in and stay there ten minutes. Then call to me. You shall have a *pique*. By the way, how much are you accustomed to?"

She lied, of course. They all do. She probably guessed that I would only give her half of what she mentioned. I made a rapid calculation, and then retired.

At the expiration of ten minutes she called me. She was sitting on the edge of the bath, wrapped in a huge Turkish bath-sheet. Her face looked fresh and moist, and her lips less parched. As I entered she thrust out one bare, thin arm with an imploring gesture.

I set my teeth as I looked at it. From shoulder to wrist it was all punctured with the needle marks. Some were inflamed and some discoloured, and she had evidently lacked courage to cleanse the arm, though it was damp from immersion. Her eyes devoured my face with a fearful eagerness.

I said nothing, but applied the *piquer*. I inwardly wished her back in the earlier stages, when a dreadful nausea is the first result of the drug, and the lulling qualities scarce compensate for the fits of awful sickness.

I took away the case, and bade her dress herself and do her hair, and then rejoin me. I wondered how often she used the stuff? The difficult part of the business was to break the habit when the system began to crave its poison.

I knew the suffering, the agony, the almost maniacal ferocity of desire. The hatred of the person who denies it. But I had an idea that Julie had not reached such a stage as this. She had erred more from weakness, than wickedness. There might still be enough moral fibre for me to work on. When she came in I made her take some breakfast, and then showed her the type-writer which had arrived. After that I sent her home, but bade her return at six o'clock for work.

"And try and keep yourself employed," I said. "Read, sew, attend to the house, take exercise. Remember you have to help me on your side, if you wish to be cured."

"If—if I didn't wish?" she said suddenly.

"It would then be my duty to tell your father, and persuade him to put you into a home where they treat maniacs like yourself," I said coldly.

She shivered and turned very white. "Oh! not that. God forbid!" she muttered. "Oh, madame, I will try. I *will*. But the agony is terrible."

"I am sure of it, and I am very sorry for you. I have seen similar cases and I know what the suffering is. Remember that story I told you about the young French girl."

"Yes, I was thinking of her when I could not sleep."

"Well, take comfort to yourself. There is no reason why you should not also be cured."

And then I left her and went to my own work. To all that restoring and decorating and treating of skins, and building up of false beauty, and witnessing that ever-sickening sight of pitiful vanities which made me long for—Sahara!

It was some relief when towards dusk my old friends Madame de Montserrat and Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley put in an appearance. They were bound for the Riviera directly the New Year set in; and chattered of Monte Carlo gowns, and marvellous hats, and Paquin creations until my head ached.

They gave me profuse orders and paid for them on the spot. They also questioned me discreetly as to Lady Judith and her doings, and her change of hair.

"I never could have believed it would have made such a difference," said Mrs. Audley. "She looks positively distinguished."

I mentioned my theories. Of course, they did not agree. They were still at that age when the first grey hair or the first wrinkle are omens of doom.

"For myself, I shall always use the 'transformation,'" said Madame de Montserrat. "See you then, madame, how it is admirable. It produces the effect so desirable and so *chic*! It is a *chef d'œuvre* of art, and always one is *comme il faut*. No untidy hairs, no derangement of *coiffure*. And for one's hair, that is well-preserved by this means,

and no one can say of it, 'See but how it grows thin or faded, this poor hair of one's own.' "

"But it stands to reason," I said, "that one's hair cannot always retain the colour of youth. Your friends know that you dye it, or hide it with a wig—a *toupée*—what not?"

"But, yes, that may be. Still one does not show actually the so *triste* effects of time."

"Well, thank goodness, my hair is my own; and a good serviceable lot of it, too!" said her friend. "Then, too, for my consolation, the hairdressers tell me it is a colour that lasts, also it is easy to touch up. Henna or peroxide will keep it bright for many a long year."

"Your years must be very happy and very desirable," I observed; "otherwise you would not dread age so much."

"Of course one dreads it. All women do. They are no longer a power. They have no more fun out of life! Good Heavens! Can there be a question of its horrors? The cruelty of Nature has made woman's life so abominably short that, in self-defence, she tries to stave off the evil days. We get a great deal more out of our years than our grandmothers ever did. That's one comfort. Why, they began to wear caps at forty! Powers above! A woman of forty to-day is as frisky as a young kitten. She can dance all night, and get up the next morning ready to shoot, or to hunt, or to golf, or to motor. She looks as young as her *débutante* daughter, and is infinitely more amusing. She is ready for everything, and shocked at nothing. And she would go on living this life to seventy, if art were only half as clever as it professes to be!"

She put on her sable toque, and began to arrange the hideous disguise that motoring has instituted.

"We make you a long adieu, Madame Beaudelet," said Julie de Montserrat. "But we return for the season, rest assured. No doubt you will be still more famous, more besought by that time. But you will spare an hour still for my friend and myself, is it not?"

"Certainly, I will."

"You have the art; of that there is no doubt," she murmured, surveying her delicately-tinted cheeks in a hand-glass. "I do not satisfy myself so well with other *masseuses* now."

"There will be plenty of specialists at Nice," I said.

"Oh, that! . . . Yes. It is easy so to call oneself. But the *real* thing—it makes very different, is it not, *ma chérie*?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Audley. "What a blessing though that the 'Rip' won't be at Monte *this* year. I really do believe she's stony broke at last. No one seems to know what has become of her."

"I have heard that there is to be a case for your Divorce Court," said Madame de Montserrat. "But you are foolish, you great ladies of England. Why be so imprudent—why so 'give-yourselves-away?' as your proverb has it. It is so silly to make scandal, and so without necessity. You have but to be *un peu discrète*. To throw the dust in the eyes, and keep the key of the stable-door! It is so bad taste, so unwise to call attention to your *liasons*—your little *affaires*. Ah! la! la! I wash my hands of you; I cannot understand."

Her friend laughed.

"If the lovely 'Rip' has a show up," she said, "it will mean a good deal of white-washing generally. Nothing like a matrimonial storm for clearing the air of matrimony. Nothing makes husbands so definite and wives so cautious—for a time. They have to console themselves with Church bazaars, and big charities, and concerts, and such like harmless amusements. But come, Julie—look at the clock! It is past Madame Beaufort's closing time. We must go."

They nodded farewell, and swept their furs and laces out of the room, and so down to the street, still chattering and still scandalizing.

With a sigh of relief I gave directions for closing the rooms and despatching various parcels. Then I gathered up my letters. It was six o'clock already, and Julie Thibaud would be waiting for me.

I ran down the wide staircase, and stood for a moment looking down the street for a hansom.

A man passing rather hurriedly, almost collided with me.

He stumbled, and then murmured an apology. I gave a little laugh of recognition.

"So it is you, Mr. D'Eyncourt. What a hurry you are in!"

He faced me abruptly. We shook hands.

"I was looking for a hansom," I said. "Of course, there isn't one on the rank."

"Shall we walk up to Regent Street," he suggested.

"Very well," I agreed; and, turning, walked in the direction that he had been hurrying when we met.

"I am quite tired," I said. "I have had a busy day, and an enlightening one."

"I should imagine most of your professional days were that," he answered.

"I think they are. I never had many illusions about my sex. Now—I have none."

"The sort of women who come to you, are scarcely specimens by which to judge others," said he.

"That is our old argument. I think women are pretty much the same in all ranks of life, and under most conditions. Their faults are their defects, and their virtues are their prerogatives. They have grown so accustomed to being called gentle, pure, self-denying, patient, that they claim the titles as an inheritance."

"I never knew two women, so hard on their sex, as you and Lady Judith."

"Probably because few of that sex dare to speak the truth of their own convictions. But here is Regent Street, and where are the hansoms?"

"I want one also," he said. "And I am in a hurry."

"Are you going my way?" I asked.

"The other side of St. James' Park is my destination—Queen Anne's Mansions."

"Let us share one to the gates."

"You are sure you don't mind?"

"Why should I?"

He made no reply except to lift his walking stick to a passing cabman. He drew up, and we got in.

"I was due home at six," I said, suddenly. "Do you know I have engaged a secretary?"

"Yes, Lady Judith told me."

"Does she tell you everything?"

"A great deal. She seems much interested in you. You are a frequent topic of conversation."

The cab pulled up abruptly, owing to a block in the traffic. I leant forward and looked at the long rows of lights, the crowded pavements, the omnibuses with their hideous advertisements, the glittering shops.

"It will always be the same," I said, involuntarily.

"What will be the same?"

He, too, leant forward. He looked at my face, and then at the crowded, noisy street.

"*That*," I said. "Life for ever pulsing, rushing, battling, struggling. Following its impulses, abusing and disabusing its instincts, until one day——"

"The crack of doom," he said. "The end of all. What odd thoughts you have for a woman."

"Generalities again! Why should not a woman have thoughts that are odd. Not altogether frivolous or absurd?"

"No reason at all except one. That she rarely shows the odd side of herself."

"Not to men, you mean."

"Does she profess candour to her own sex?"

"Very often—as a *pose*. The better to hide her secrets."



"Have all women secrets?"

The cab moved on with a sudden jerk.

"Why not? Men don't hold a monopoly of everything."

Our eyes met in a sudden gleam of electric light. The cab turned into Piccadilly, scattering the usual crowd. I took my arms off the cab door and leant back again.

I wondered why he had looked at me so strangely—with such intense curiosity.

"I am afraid we shall soon hold a monopoly of—nothing," he said, with a whimsical smile. "You are taking everything from us with a bold pretence of 'going shares.'"

I was silent. It suddenly seemed strange to me to be driving along in this way, beside a man I had only seen three times. Talking to him so unreservedly. I wondered, also, if he was in any way different from other men. Men I had known, hated, feared, despised. Men whose very presence conveyed a sense of evil. Men who suggested secret vices, unnameable horrors; suppressed books with strange histories in them that were forbidden to the public, and held in stealthy bondage by the few. Fantastic characters, whose apish tricks called down men's scorn and women's hatred.

Alas! how soiled and degraded those years of enlightenment looked now. How I longed to tear out every leaf whose writing had been their writing, whose history was their history.

But surely, surely this man was different? His clear eyes seemed so truthful, his quiet face so *good*. I started suddenly.

"You can certainly be deaf, Madame de Marsac, when you choose," I heard him say. "You will neither answer me nor address me. Have I been unhappy enough to offend——"

"Offend! . . . No; I was just thinking. I'm afraid I have developed a bad habit of losing myself in the fog of my own speculations."

"You have lived much alone, perhaps?"

"Yes," I said, bitterly. "Alone, with everything that is a denial of solitude."

"I think I understand."

We both lapsed into silence.

"Do you know," he said at last, "I believe there is one woman who would do you good—get you out of your morbid atmosphere. I am going to see her now."

"Yes," I said, indifferently. "Who is she?"

"My mother," he said, quietly.

I looked at him with sudden interest. The term was constantly on the lips of French sons of all ages and sizes.

It had often amused me. But it is rarely that an Englishman alludes to his domestic relations. "Oh! does she live in London?" I asked.

"Some day I will tell you her history," he said. "But not till you have seen her."

He stopped the cab and got out. I leant over the doors and gave him my hand.

"Good-bye. I hope I shall know your mother some day."

"So do I—for both your sakes!" he said.

## XIX

JULIA THIBAUD was sitting before the typewriter. It was all in order and ready for work as I hurried in.

"I am sorry I am late. I was detained," I said. "How are you feeling?"

She flushed slightly.

"Very tired—and very depressed."

"Oh, that is to be expected. But no pain?"

She shook her head.

I looked keenly at her and touched her pulse. It was feeble and intermittent.

"You need some food or stimulant," I said. "What would you like? Coffee; sandwich; wine?"

She shook her head. "Coffee, if you do not mind. I cannot eat. Food seems horrible."

I touched the bell and gave Barbe the order; then went into the bedroom and removed my working clothes, and got into a tea-gown as usual.

She had drunk the coffee, and was mechanically tapping the keys of the typewriter when I returned. I asked no more questions but set to business at once.

She was very quick and skilful. I praised her, and evinced so much interest in her methods and in the machine that she began to explain both. I kept her talking till dinner-time. As Barbe announced it she rose. The old constraint and misery were back in her face and in her eyes.

"Won't you stay and have a chat afterwards?" I asked her.

She seated herself again. "I—I should like to. I hate to go home. But——"


"Oh, don't make excuses. If I didn't want you I wouldn't ask you."

I sent her in some fruit and a glass of wine. I kept wine in the sideboard now, though I rarely touched it myself.

Again, as on the previous night, I made her come in while I had my coffee and cigarette. She was less sullen, but more timid. I knew why. She felt herself mastered, and she was afraid. My experience of character had been so various that I was able to sum up its idiosyncracies with little difficulty. Jules Gautier had called me "a hypnotist by instinct." He had declared me a woman whose will was for ever stretching out tentacles of force; longing to rule, and to dominate, and to persuade.

Whether he was right or not I cannot say. I had never felt the impulse quite so strongly as on this occasion of contact with a weak-minded girl. I knew that I could bend her will to mine with the greatest ease. Make her my slave instead of that of her drug. But I wanted no slave, and had a supreme contempt for slavery. I lay back in my chair and smoked, and studied her, keenly alive to her increasing discomfort and her unwilling subservience. I put forth an effort to make her speak, knowing that she was unwilling to do so. The room was dark save for the firelight. She cowered down towards its warmth, yet from time to time lifted a transparent hand to shield her eyes.

"I didn't want to begin, of course," she said, mechanically. "But I used to be so tired, and the life was so horrid. Then one day—it was after Ada took up with Lord Applesea—I heard her telling another girl what a lovely thing it was. How pain, and discomfort, and everything went away from you in a flash, and life was simply a Paradise. You lay wrapped in golden sunshine, and saw wonderful and beautiful things, and heard exquisite music,



and it just seemed as if the world and people and *everything* vanished, and left you alone with your delight."

She crouched down and clasped her knees with her long, thin arms.

"She asked me to try, and I let her. At first I thought it horrible, but I soon got to like it. It was just as she said. No pain, no weariness. A sort of lovely dream. Then, one night, she persuaded me to go to his place. The young marquis—you know. It was like Aladdin's palace. All flowers and jewels, and the loveliest lights; and one room we looked into, through a grating, was the most perfect of all."

She shivered, suddenly and convulsively. With a recognition of what was still in store for me, I bade her go on with the story. It might relieve her mind. Her voice grew drowsily monotonous.

"Divans, couches, pictures, statues, all the most exquisite colours; and all dim, yet clear. The room held nothing but men. All young. Some were smoking, some merely lay back as if asleep. Some were bright and alert, and talked to each other in low, eager voices. Ada told me they were all under the influence. Some took cocaine, some morphia, some smoked opium. But they all seemed happy. As if—I do not know what to call it—as if life was quite complete. They desired nothing more."

She suddenly sank down from the chair to the rug.

"And there in another room were the girls. Beautifully dressed, covered with jewels; and all sorts of delightful things to eat or drink on tables about them. And there was one woman—a sort of leader, or mistress, I think. She was lying down, and on a table by her side was a queer little metal case. And Ada told me she it was who gave the injections to the girls. Some had very little. Some a great deal. It all depended."

"What sort of girls were they?"

"Oh, ladies. Actresses, one or two. And others, Ada said, came unknown to their people, because this Mrs. Dorian was a relation of the young lord's."

"Mrs. Dorian who gave the *pique* to these girls?" I cried, in horror.

"Yes, she was one of the worst. But she was very clever. No one had ever suspected it."

I was silent. It seemed horrible knowledge for a young girl. Worse than my experiences of Paris; than things I had read of savage orgies, and Eastern vices. And this child before me spoke of the scene with envy and regret. The moral degradation of it all seemed to have escaped her altogether.

"What more?" I said at length.

"Oh, I never went again. They were awfully particular. Ada said there'd have been a terrible row had any of them known what she had done."

"And this girl—Ada; where is she now?"

"On the Riviera. He has a lovely place there, I believe. And a steam yacht, and ever so many motor cars. Ada said she should have a glorious time!"

"A glorious time!" I leant forward and spoke with all the earnestness of my purpose. "Julie, do you know what will be the end of that 'glorious time'? It is almost too horrible to describe. The craving will go on and on, until everything in life is subservient to it. Everything. Human ties, love, decency, morality, self-respect. The monstrous disease will turn them into monsters. Objects from which normal men and women will recoil with horror. For every moment's gratification there is a purgatory of suffering. For every year of this fatal indulgence there is an exaction of life-penalty. And the exaction becomes so intolerable that death, or madness, is a relief. That is the fate in store for those people whom you have described. That, Julie, might have been your fate."

She shuddered, convulsively. "Oh!" she cried, "I was never told—I never knew——"

"Fortunately, I know. I am not going to promise you an easy cure—or even a speedy one. But I am determined you shall not continue with this vile habit. Do you hear?"

"Yes," she sobbed. "Oh, it is so hard—so hard. I only used it twice a day."

"To-day," I said, "You have had it once. To-morrow I shall give you a smaller dose than to-day; and so by degrees lessen it. Meanwhile you must take good, nourishing food. Physical weakness leaves you a prey to the craving. As you regain strength you will cease to suffer. But if—if it gets very bad, you must come and stay here altogether."

"Here, madame?"

"Yes. Under my own eye—my own control. When I am away I shall leave a nurse to look after you. But I hope *that* may not be necessary. If you will try to yield your will entirely to me, if you will say to yourself 'I *must* do what she tells me,' then that will make things easier."

She was still crouched before the fire. I saw the tears rolling helplessly down her cheeks.

"It is coming on now," she moaned, "the pain, the fit."

She shook convulsively.

"Get up and take my arm and walk about the room," I said.

She obeyed at once. But she had a terrible hour, and so had I. Almost I resolved to tell the truth to her father. But something restrained me. That patient, humble old man, leading his dreary life—so pious, so good—how could I plunge him into the horrors of this knowledge. The ever-constant dread, the suspicion, the disgust.

"No!" I said to myself. "I took up the task. I'll go through with it!"

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Fame has its penalties as well as its delights. Each day, each week, proved that. Women still poured in with claims,

persuasions, demands, that occupied my time from morning till night. Money seemed no object where vanity was in question. Sums were lavished upon their skins and cosmetics that would have kept whole families in comfort. The "Eau de l'Enclos" spelt a small fortune to me, and an income to Monsieur Thibaud. We had a French agent now, and the little *pharmacie* was almost entirely given over to the making up of my preparations.

I had taken Julie from there. Some days—the "good" days—I made her accompany me to my business premises, and so kept her employed. At others, when nervous collapse threatened, I left her at the flat under charge of Barbe Piccotée, who carried out my instructions religiously. It was now some three weeks since I had seen Lady Judith. I began to wonder if she had left town. Neither had I seen nor heard anything of Paul D'Eyncourt, or any of the interesting and remarkable personages I had met at that Christmas dinner. At the end of the three weeks, however, just as I had come home from a long and tiring day, Paul D'Eyncourt called. Barbe Piccotée showed him into the front room. I was with Julie Thibaud at the typewriter. He heard the "clicks," and came over to us.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you. I have brought a message. Lady Judith wants you to dine with her at seven to-night. She has a box for the theatre."

"At seven! It's very short notice."

"Don't refuse," he said. "My mother is to be one of her party; I want you so much to know her."

I looked at Julie. "Can you manage by yourself? These letters almost tell you what to answer."

"This is my valuable little amanuensis," I added to D'Eyncourt.

He nodded pleasantly. "So I thought. A fellow-feeling, you know."

The girl flushed to her temples as she met his eyes. She returned his greeting almost awkwardly.



"Are you coming?" he asked me again. "If so I will wait and take you."

"Thank you," I said. "Give me twenty minutes, then."

He laughed. "*Only*? I suppose they mean half-an-hour."

But exactly at the twenty minutes I re-entered

I wore the brown and orange gown, and had a long sealskin cloak over my arm.

He looked up surprised. Julie and he had been talking over the rival virtues of Yöst and Remington.

"Ready, are you? Well, I recant my heresies as to the time women take over dressing."

"There won't be much time for yourself," I said.

"I shall claim ten minutes grace, and take no soup."

He took up his hat and stood looking at me. I thought how manly and yet how young he was. What an air of fresh, clean-souled, wholesome manhood seemed to emanate from his whole personality.

Then I gave a few hurried directions to Julie, bade her be sure to have some dinner, and we went off. He had a cab waiting.

"This is quite an unexpected pleasure," I said. I have had no social gaiety of any description since Christmas night. I was wondering if Lady Judith had left town?"

"She has been staying at her country place. An old manor house in Dorsetshire. It is the loveliest old house. I always wonder she can put up with London after it."

"Were you there also?"

"This last week only. We came up last night. What an interesting girl that secretary of yours is, by the way."

"Julie Thibaud? You thought her interesting?" I said, quickly.

"Very. She was rather shy at first. But that is an agreeable change from the pert chatterboxes who usually command the type-writer. How old is she?"

"Eighteen," I said.

"She looks very sad. As if some trouble or sorrow oppressed her."

"She has not had a very happy life," I said. "I believe her experiences in an office were rather unpleasant."

"I hate to think of women working," he said. "I always want them to be safe and sheltered. To have love and home as their rightful prerogatives. To be kept out of the strife, out of the mire. Worshipped and beloved."

"The modern woman would tell you that she prefers the arena to the shelter. That domesticity spells only boredom. That she loves her club infinitely better than her home. And that public work, platform notoriety, the bustle and strife of business, are preferable to the dull, old time rôle of wife and mother!"

"How you do exalt types into classes," he said. "Human nature is full of variety as it is full of extremes. You dissect one portion, but you leave out another. No one should generalize where humanity is concerned."

"The elements are always the same. They always have been the same," I said. "It is only the environment that changes. I don't care how far back you go, you will find that men and women, taken separately, or together, have possessed, or abused, or falsified the same instincts. Civilisation has only given them the means of developing those instincts. But they are still the primitive notes in the scale out of which we bring melody or discord."

"You have read a great deal, Madame de Marsac?"

"Yes," I said. "Human books as well as printed ones."

"And—you have suffered?"

I was silent. Conscious of an emotion produced by the faltering of his voice as he put the question.

"Who has not?" I said at last. "That, too, is part of the universal law."

"Yes, part of life, part of the soul's education and the body's penalty. Yet it cannot obliterate truth and beauty from the great scheme."

"You believe in some great purpose behind it all? I suppose you are what is called a Christian?"

"I—I hope so," he said, hesitatingly. "In any case I believe in God. I believe in human goodness and in human development. It hurts me to hear life and its mysteries discussed flippantly—or placed on the lowest scale of Realism."

"You are very young," I said, bitterly; "and probably life has never meant for you a critical crisis. A time when all longings are swept into a seething channel of chaos. When everything is dark and obscure, and only pain and disgust mean consciousness. The beauty, the mystery, the passion of life are overwhelmed in the flood of its miseries. Not only individual miseries. I have looked out on a wider sea than personal experience."

"Have you never known love," he asked. "A man's, or a woman's; a friend's, or a child's?"

"Never!" I said, almost fiercely. For he had inadvertently touched a throbbing wound, and the pain was hateful.

"I am sorry for you," he said, gently. "But it helps me to understand."

We said nothing more until the cab stopped at Eaton Square.

Lady Judith welcomed me warmly.

"I've not been well," she said. "London in the winter always knocks me up. So I flew to my pinewoods and sea. Some day I must take you there. It is culture in the wilderness. A spot Nature has made too beautiful for interference. Well, how are you? You look as fresh and well as ever. Ah! here is Mrs. D'Eyncourt."

She moved away from the fireplace to greet a tall, elegant-looking woman who entered.

The first impression she gave me was of that adequate, yet painfully vulgarized title—"lady." She embodied refinement, delicacy, purity, womanhood. She looked her

age, and made that age beautiful, not a travesty. Her soft, silvery hair crowned her head like a halo of saintliness. Her skin was exquisitely fair, though somewhat too pale for health. Her clear, blue eyes looked frankly in one's face, as if they had nothing to disguise, nothing to fear. Lady Judith looked horribly ugly and horribly wicked by contrast.

"So you are Paul's mother," I thought, as we shook hands and measured swords of acquaintance to come. "Now I can understand Paul."

## XX

THAT night was destined to stand out in my mind.

I knew why Paul D'Eyncourt had chafed at my strictures on women as a sex. I knew that the love and influence of such a woman as he called "mother" meant the vindication of the worst and the vilest for her sake. Yet there was no mawkish sentimentalism about their relationship. None of the exaggerations I had so often laughed at when French sons had babbled the everlasting "*ma mère*," and French mothers had poured ridicule on manhood of thirteen stone and thirty years, as "*mon petit*" and "*mon ange* !"

But with this mother and son there was an ever present consciousness of mutual comprehension and mutual devotion. It was very beautiful and very rare.

Through dinner, and through the four acts of a modern play, at once foolish and unnaturally immoral, I found myself watching these two persons with unusual interest.

When anything was said on the stage that amused or struck one, it seemed perfectly natural that the other should turn for look or smile of answering sympathy. The chime of the mother's laugh echoed in the son's. The quiet humour of her criticism found an eager response in his. Lady Judith was caustic and petulant. She evinced also a curious restlessness that was unusual. At times her eyes looked dull, as if bodily pain were at war with her duties as hostess. I asked her once if she were not feeling well. Her reply was snappish, and startled me.

"Of course I am ; I'm always well. I can't remember a day's real illness in my life !"

But, all the same, I felt she was uneasy at heart about herself. The more so on account of that very good health of which she had held so long and fortunate a monopoly. But I said no more.

It was during the second act of the painfully unhumorous comedy that I saw a party of late arrivals enter an opposite box. The stage and house were both dark. A dialogue of stupendous mystery and stupidity held the principals in an equivocal situation, utterly independent of commonsense or an open door. A flash of jewels and the sheen of something white and silvery attracted my notice to the new arrivals. I saw two women seat themselves in the front chairs, and throw back gorgeous evening cloaks. Two men stood behind them looking out and into the gloom of the house. A sibilant whispering and chattering marked their inattention to the business of the stage. It was pronounced enough to bring a sharp admonitory "hiss" from that abode of the gods, where criticism abides, and where he who is no respecter of persons claims the personal liberty of an unbiassed mind.

I felt amused. The impertinence of Society challenged by the impertinence of shilling critics of good manners, was something of an anomaly. But I was new to English theatres and their ways.

Lady Judith roused herself at that hiss, and raised her opera glasses.

I heard a smothered exclamation; she bent forward and touched Paul's arm.

"Look," she whispered, hoarsely. "Who are those people opposite? Isn't that woman in white satin Lady Ripley?"

I lifted interested eyes to the glitter and snow that made up a mysterious personality. Paul took the glasses and adjusted them.

"Yes," he said, softly. "It is the Countess!"

"Who is with her? Do you know?"

"One man looks like Neugasse. I don't know the other. The woman is Viscountess Aggerton."

"I wonder why she has come back," muttered Lady Judith. "I wonder what fresh devilry——"

She broke off abruptly. I leant back in my chair and wondered also.

When the house was once more illuminated I looked eagerly at this renowned Delilah of the Smart World.

I saw a woman of some thirty-five to forty years. She was exquisitely painted and exquisitely dressed; her jewels made a flame of brilliance about her neck and shoulders. They crowned her dark hair, and sparkled in her ears and round her arms.

To me it did not seem in the best of taste to make such a display in a public theatre. She was the cynosure of curious and uncomplimentary attention. Glasses were levelled at her. Remarks were evidently made. But she treated all notice with an insolent indifference. She and her party were certainly noisy enough to convey an idea of having dined "not wisely but too well."

They laughed loudly, and stared and pointed out people in the stalls or circle regardless of manners.

Lady Judith had retired to the back of the box; but when I glanced round I saw that her eyes were fixed with a burning, merciless hatred on the radiantly lovely woman opposite. She seemed unaware of my notice.

Again it struck me that there must be some mystery underneath this open hatred. Some passion that absorbed the soul—some desire that dominated the mind of this strange woman. She sat, half crouched in her chair, wholly forgetful of us; wholly occupied with watching and noting every look, and gesture, and movement of the beautiful Lady Ripley.

I heard Paul D'Eyncourt's voice at last.

"It is Neugasse," he said. "I wasn't certain at first. Rather strange, isn't it?"

Lady Judith raised herself abruptly. "Cad to cad!" she said, scornfully. "I have always told you that woman sprang from the gutter. She'll return to it, you'll see!"

"But fancy bringing that man with her to a public theatre!" he said.

She laughed contemptuously. "Can't you guess why? That's *his* price for the last advance. Her name's too rotten to hold good. She has to pay in other ways."

D'Eyncourt looked uncomfortable. He turned aside and began to talk to me. I was watching his mother now. She also seemed strangely interested in that opposite box.

"So that is the famous Lady Ripley," she said at last. "I have never seen her before."

"That is to acknowledge yourself very old-fashioned," said her son. "Almost as bad as saying you've never seen the King or Queen, or any of our modern celebrities."

She glanced at me, smiling. "I am old-fashioned. I like old ways, old looks, old manners, old friends. Modern life is too rapid for me. I have lived a great deal in the country. In fact, I only come up to town occasionally for Paul's sake. I have a queer little eyrie—a top-flat in that great ladder overlooking St. James' Park, and Westminster; but I love best my little cottage in Berks—its garden, its poultry yard, its simple homely days. I think Paul loves it, too. Only, to him it is the change; to me, the necessity."

"And you stay in town more for your son's pleasure than your own?" I said.

"He is all I have, you see. A quiet existence is not a man's lot. For him must always come the strife and stir of the world. So I let him go. But, when my need becomes too great to endure, I fly to the 'eyrie' yonder. And he spends as much time with me as he can spare."

"And draws you out of it on occasion?" said I.

"Yes. The theatre is one of my great pleasures. I am afraid, however, I cannot say I have enjoyed *this* play. The drama of to-day is strangely illogical—and perverted.



It seems to me to lack any element that touches or appeals. Its wit is forced, and its *morale* crude and untrue."

"I have been fed on French drama, and French views of morals and psychology," I said. "This sort of stuff seems very tame and very silly, I must say."

"The Comedy of Life is the only true drama," she answered. "Creative genius should always play the part of seer; should mistrust personal feeling, and test the pulse of truthfulness. To dissect life may be very clever—but to paint it sympathetically is a truer art. One touch of real human feeling is worth a hundred brilliant platitudes."

"But the platitudes make people laugh. The feeling—annoys or disturbs them."

"You are right," said Paul. "The modern dramatist knows his public. The last thing they want is to *feel*; the first and chief to be amused. Human progress is an object lesson in depravity, according to our modern stage; and the popular dramatist is the man who can hold the mirror up to vice, and set it playing the tricks of a clown in a pantomime of scenic effects."

"That reminds me of Mr. Templeton," said I, smiling.

"Templeton," murmured Lady Judith, suddenly. "Didn't I see Archey in the stalls? I'm sure I did. Go and look, Paul, and ask him to come to supper with us."

"The curtain is just going up," remonstrated Paul D'Eyncourt.

"Well—look out for him. I want him particularly. Mrs. D'Eyncourt, you'll come back with us, won't you?"

"If you'll excuse me, no," she said, gently. "I'm rather tired, and it's nearly eleven o'clock now. It would make it so late. Paul can put me in a cab."

"I shall take you home," said Paul, abruptly. "I'm sure Templeton will be delighted to take my place."

I glanced at him somewhat curiously. There was visible annoyance in his usually calm face. I wondered why he so plainly disliked Archey Templeton.

## Queer Lady Judas

I looked down into the crowded rows of stalls. Yes, Lady Judith was right. Archey was there. But I could not tell if he had discovered us.

However, the fourth act was so appallingly dull that no one paid the stage the compliment of attention. Even the pit and gallery began to drift out. Only the happy owners of "free seats" remained steadfast in places unusual to them or their extemporized evening-dress. Lady Judith succeeded in attracting Archey's attention. He had an end stall, and stepped quietly out and came to our box.

I heard them whispering in the background. Then he dropped into a vacant chair, and we shook hands.

"Tommy-rot, from beginning to end, isn't it?" he said to me. "Can't imagine why they don't withdraw it. The house is packed with paper. Suburbia is here in great form, keeping its hat under the seats, and revelling in Sunday-blouse effects. Poor Suburbia! It is as true to the blouse and the economy of evading the cloak-room as it is to its plant in the window, and the glories of a never-used drawing-room! Have you ever studied suburban effects? I wonder if the lives are narrowed by the houses, or the houses are the outcome of the lives. Anything uglier, more tasteless, more arrogant, or more hideously dreary than a London suburb has not yet been evolved by the architectural genius of Great Britain."

"You are spoiling an anti-climax," said I, laughing.

"Don't waste your time on that drivel. I wish I had seen you before! I was alone. My stall was given me by a friend who couldn't come; and as I'd heard a lot about the piece I thought I'd look in. I heard it was a study in epigrams and the Eleventh Commandment. See, I wrote some on my cuff. I'll bring them out as my own, just to test people's memories. 'Nothing comes to him who waits except hunger.' I'll introduce that in the *mauvais quart d'heure* before dinner is announced. Here's another. 'Can a name written in water be said to float?' That's

appropriate for companies in liquidation. Or this: 'Put off everything till to-morrow, but motor to-day.' Isn't that brilliant? Yet I believe the gallery laughed—or did it hoot?"

"Hissed, I think."

"It naturally would. It contains all the intelligence of the theatre, and inspires the criticisms of *The Times*. 'Useful days make useless age.' That's too deep for me. I know nothing of the one, and desire to know nothing of the other. 'A play is written to order before orders are written for it.' Well, that's the best and the last. This one will soon have an 'order' to quit, or I'm much mistaken."

"Do be quiet, Archey," murmured Lady Judith; "I can't hear what the man is saying."

"Nothing so brilliant or so interesting as what I am," answered the incorrigible youth.

"There—it's over. She's crying—or is it laughing? Well either are absurd endings for a play! Down with the curtain—and, good riddance. Ah! Mrs. D'Eyncourt, I haven't seen you for a century. Last October, I think! How well you always look. The country is the best beauty-doctor after all!"

Again I wondered why he had introduced that word into the conversation. But I could read nothing in his face. We all got into our cloaks, and made our way slowly to the entrance, where police regulations had rendered the securing of one's carriage as nearly impossible as the common sense of County Councils and Local Boards. Lady Judith, and I, and Archey Templeton drove off to Eaton Square. Paul D'Eyncourt, true to his word, accompanied his mother in a hansom.

"What a good boy that is," observed Archey, as we bowled along. "Exemplary in all respects. I wonder how it feels?"

"Don't make yourself out a reprobate, Archey," said Lady Judith. "It is a sign of youth, and you should know better than to exhibit a sign of what is self-evident."

He laughed amusedly.

"Oh, but I am a reprobate, Lady Judith. I have two or three pasts. They are bound in scarlet, and purple, and blue. I wear them as phylacteries. A constant reminder and a constant warning."

"I hope you profit by the warning," I said.

"On the contrary, it is the strongest temptation to persist. I feel I ought to brave further perils to prove I am not afraid of myself. More lives are spoilt by self-denial than by self-indulgence. The one closes all doors of knowledge, the other opens them. Fear should never intrude upon curiosity. It is a malady of mediævalism, and should be relegated to the mediæval era. Every mental excursion used to be accounted a sin, because the mind, once free, set the body at defiance."

"I think you talk a great deal of nonsense," said Lady Judith, pettishly; "and you are not dining out to-night?"

"No," he said, smiling up at her in the lamplight. "But I'm paying for my supper in advance, so as to be able to enjoy it just like any ordinary, commonplace, human being."

"Tell me," she said, abruptly, "have you heard why Lady Ripley has returned from Sahara, or Khartoum, or wherever it was she went off to a month ago?"

"She, as a matter of fact, went no further than an island. And not even a foreign island. Merely an ordinary small, ten square miles island, in old-fashioned British territory!"

Lady Judith looked annoyed. "Do drop nonsense," she said, sharply. "I want the truth. How did you find out?"

"Dear lady, should I be worth my—income—if I did not make myself acquainted with all the scandals of fashionable life? They are the text of my sermons—I mean my conversation. And not to know what my Lady Rip says, does, and leaves undone, is to proclaim oneself unworthy of entertainment by London Society!"

"Then Sahara was all nonsense?"

"Of course. As far as she was concerned. It was her lord and—not—master, who went into the desert to eat locusts and wild honey. She remained behind for the—hunting season."

"But I thought you said an island?"

"Yes. A friend of hers had bought an island. It was quite a charming one, with a miniature Crusoe hut, and pigs, and cows, and all that on it. Of course, nowadays, no one would dream of staying on an island—alone. One has a house-party, and a steam launch, and plays Bridge. It is all quite harmless and quite modern. That's what Lady Rip and her friend the Viscountess did. It probably accounts also for the presence of that Jew money-lender in her box to-night."

Lady Judith leant back against the cushions of the brougham. She asked no more questions.

## XXI

It was a most amusing supper. Paul D'Eyncourt joined us soon after we had sampled the chafing dish; a recently-organised institution of Lady Judith's theatre parties. He and Archey Templeton acted and re-acted upon one another in a fashion that sharpened the wits of both. Yet the veiled animosity was distinct to me, and I wondered at its reason. Archey drank a great deal of champagne, but it only made him more brilliantly nonsensical. There was not a subject his satire did not touch—or his mockery turn into ridicule.

He gave us a lesson in the art of making epigrams, and chose some of the Proverbs of Solomon as illustrations. The solemnity of his methods, and the topsy-turviness of their result were bewildering.

He wound up by going to the piano and singing a "song without words"—as he called it. It was the oddest thing. He simply "hummed" to the most extraordinary chaos of chords, and the weirdest of harmonies. Yet he made the song perfectly intelligible.

Lady Judith was delighted.

"I shall give a musical party expressly for it," she exclaimed. "Have you done it anywhere yet, Archey?"

"No," he said. "You are first honoured. I am glad you like it. It is so easy to give life to life. But to give it to mere plastic formlessness amounts almost to genius! I confess I wept with delight when success at last smiled on my efforts; though the smile only existed on the face of Lady St. Albans' black pug. It was in her boudoir that I composed it."

"Whose—the pug's?"

"No; Lady St. Albans'. I think Society has not yet set up the *boudoir du chien*. It draws the line at garden-parties and birthday *fêtes*."

"But has Lady St. Albans heard it? If so—"

"Oh, no. She was out, and the man asked me to wait. I sat down at the piano, and this idea occurred to me. I tried its effect on Ophelia. I succeeded in winning a smile. At least, she showed all her teeth."

"You are sure you did not feel, as well as see them?" said Paul D'Eyncourt.

"I knew you would say that. The temptation was irresistible. Lady Judith, when will you give your musical party? Mrs. Rollingsstone has one on the fifteenth. Do you think the 'off season' can stand two such events?"

"Oh, there are heaps of people in town. And they enjoy things so much more when they really haven't many to enjoy."

"I think no one enjoys anything nowadays," said Archey, playing weird harmonies with his left hand, as he talked and smoked.

We were in the smaller dining-room on the ground floor, used by Lady Judith for her supper-parties. The piano stood in a corner facing the table. Archey sat sideways on the music-stool, his profile towards us.

Suddenly the clock struck the half-hour after midnight. I started.

"Dear me! I had no idea it was so late. I must be going, Lady Judith."

"Can I—may I be of any assistance? Escort duty; cab whistler—?"

Archey rose and came toward the table eagerly. "Thanks, no," said Paul D'Eyncourt, brusquely. "I will see Madame de Marsac home."

I looked at him in surprise at so summary an interference. But he left the room and went to whistle up a cab. Lady

## Queer Lady Judas

Judith had sent the servants to bed when supper was served.

"Your humble slave is not permitted his deserts," said Archey Templeton to me. "But, as a wiser tongue than mine has said, 'Opportunity is the vindication of fools.'"

"Whose opportunity? What are you saying?" exclaimed Lady Judith. "Something about fools. Didn't Carlyle say we were all fools except himself."

"Yes," said Archey, "and everyone *agreed* with him—except his wife."

"Really—really," remonstrated Lady Judith, "I draw the line at puns, Archey. They are only admissable at Scotch dinner-parties. Or is it Irish? No, that's bulls, isn't it? Though why bulls, goodness knows."

"It comes of Papal supremacy," said the incorrigible youth.

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Paul D'Eyncourt said very little on our cabward way, except to give me a message from his mother, begging me to come and see her any Sunday afternoon I pleased, while she was in town.

I told him I should be delighted to do so. Then I put a tentative question: "Does she know my—business?"

"I told her nothing. I don't know whether Lady Judith did."

"Would it make any difference?" I said.

"Can you ask? Do you suppose for a moment she is the sort of woman to be ruled by prejudice?"

"I should imagine not. But I like to be perfectly sure of my ground. So I shall tell her my own story."

"It is not a story to be ashamed of, I am sure."

"The story? Perhaps not. But—the results of it."

"Would you rather not be—what you are?" he asked, eagerly.

"Oh! I am scarcely prepared to say that. The *occupation has its interests*, and of all things in life I hate



merely mechanical work. Human machines are the most pitiable product of the world's inventions."

"You could never be a machine," he said. "You are too full of energy, of power, of resource. It is only shallow people, weak people who allow themselves to be the puppets of Fate; who sink into a groove of their own making, and then cry out that they can't get out of it. But here we are at your flats! I must say good-night! When will you come to Queen Anne's Mansions? Next Sunday? She is really anxious to know you!"

"Is she?" I said. "Very well; I will come next Sunday, if possible."

And I went up the flight of stone stairs to my door.

It was opened as soon as my key touched it. Julie Thibaud stood there; ghastly, grey-faced, frantic.

"I thought you would never come! I have been in hell—I can't stand it. You must give me back my needle."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," I said, sternly. "What is the matter with you? You were all right last night."

"I couldn't sleep—or rest. The fit came on about ten o'clock. I searched everywhere. Your drawers—the bureau—"

"How *dared* you—"

She laughed fiercely. "I'd dare anything when I want *that*. Barbe Piccotée found me. She scolded awfully. She has been sitting up with me. But I pretended to go to sleep, and she left me alone."

"Has it gone off?" I asked.

"I'm all cold—and so weak and sick—"

She was shivering like a shaken leaf. I looked at her pityingly.

"It's a choice of evils," I said, suddenly. "I'll give you a strong dose of brandy. That will make you sleep."

"It always goes to my head."

"I'd rather see you drunk than morphia mad," I said,

savagely, as I poured out the spirit and forced her to drink it.

In less than half-an-hour she was in a dead sleep.

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Wearied out, I undressed myself and got into bed. But I was too restless for sleep. I went over all the events of the evening. I pictured that beautiful woman, her strange life, her interest for Lady Judith. I thought of Mrs. D'Eyncourt, with her lovely, placid face, on which the hand of Time rested so gently. I thought of Paul, her son; and then, by force of contrast, of Archey Templeton's absurdities. I asked myself how and why these people had come into my life. Was it to influence or disturb? Was something to be revealed to me, or had I some part to play in the chapter of happenings to come? How curious it was that we had to wait always on events. That not one hour or one day could foretell the next!

The mere accident of meeting a stranger in a fog-blinded street had saddled me with the awful responsibility of a human destiny. I could not say "I will not be responsible"—without a guilty sense of injury to this self-tortured soul; without a shamed acknowledgement of cowardice. I held her secret—and she held me. Thus we stood battling with possibilities; antagonistic, and yet inseparable.

I tossed, and turned, and sighed, and wondered. But in the little, white bed in the adjoining room all was silent and at peace. The girl slept. Another victory was gained. Another day had ensured abstinence from that hateful drug.

If it would only last. If only I might succeed. If only one day the real Julie Thibaud could step out from that wreck of shattered girlhood. Step out clean and saved as a leper freed from his loathsome disease. As the convalescent fresh from the delights of bath and clean linen; with

health once more as guerdon of suffering. If only it might be.

But alas ! I only woke to the old annoyance and the old mad beseeching, and again I had to consent to a small quantity of the hateful stuff. I was obliged to leave her at home. She was unfit for anything. I had warned Barbe Piccotée never to get her any sort of medicine, and never to let her go out alone. This morning the old woman faced me with trouble in her kindly eyes.

"The poor *p'tite*, what is it then that she has ? She appears so wild, so excited. I find her quite of a violence unbelievable, with all madame's drawers open, and the contents scattered—thrown to here, to there ! I scold. *Ma foi !* But I am of an anger that should frighten one. Then she cry. Oh ! it is piteous how she cry and say, 'Madame is cruel—Madame has robbed her of something she loves as her life.' Oh ! *la ! la !* It was not a night of the most pleasant, let madame be assured. It is not twice I should like to see myself left to that one alone ! *Ma foi, non !*"

"She is suffering from a curious malady," I said. "She has been in the habit of taking a certain medicine for it. But it is harmful, this remedy ; a deadly poison, in fact. And I am trying to break her of using it."

"But why then should madame make of herself a doctor ? Why not place *la pauvre* with some one other who could discharge her of responsibility. Madame has her own anxieties, her own business. It is not fair that her home life should be thus disturbed."

I checked her voluble tongue.

"Never mind, Barbe ; I have my own reasons. If you do not care to help me I will call in a nurse who——"

But then there was an outcry ! A nurse—a *Sœur de Charité*—of what use, indeed ! As long as madame desired there was she, Barbe Piccotée, to fulfil the commands of madame. It had pleased *le bon Dieu* to give to this same

Barbe Piccotée the health and the strength of good years. But yes! and the desire to assist madame in all ways—*convenable* or otherwise.

So that set the matter at rights once more; and I left Julie in bed, and under strict surveillance, while I betook myself to Hanover Square.

It was whilst walking there in the cold, bright sunshine of January that my thoughts turned once more to the events of the previous night. To the appearance of the notorious Countess. To her companions. A fast and unprincipled woman—and a Jewish money-lender. There was something in the name I had heard on Paul D'Eyncourt's lips that struck me as familiar. But for long I pursued its haunting significance through the channels of memory, without a clue. At last it flashed upon me. Somewhere I had a letter purporting to be from a firm of money-lenders, anxious to finance business women—or oblige them. I recollected that the letter had come to me almost on the heels of my first advertisement. The names stood out before me: Neugasse, Krapmann & Co.; and the man with Lady Ripley answered to one of these names. Neugasse. The more I thought of it the more extraordinary it seemed. Titled ladies did very odd things I knew; but surely they might draw the line at admitting a City money-lender into their theatre-box.

Lady Judith's explanation set the matter in even a worse light than caprice. Represented it as an obligation—a *quid pro quò*. It poured contempt on a great lady's name and position. It set me wondering again how women in Society could do such things as this woman had done, and seemed inclined to continue doing. But probably she knew her world, and how much it would stand. Besides, she still went to Court. A tiara not only covers a multitude of sins; it condones them.

## XXII

I HAVE often wondered whether a persistent thought links the thinker to the obsessing subject of that thought. Whether all the queer circle of amity or attraction is united by an electric current—a current whose force is joined or broken by various brain-waves of sympathy or antipathy. Often I had found that the fact of thinking very strongly and persistently of a particular person, resulted in either seeing or hearing from that person. Therefore, when amongst my morning's correspondence I found a coronet-emblazoned envelope, and read—

“Lady Ripley would be glad if Madame Beaufort would call on her at 10.30 a.m. Friday next.”

I was less surprised than might be expected. All the same, I wondered how she had heard of me so soon.

Next, I asked myself should I break my rule and go to this autocratic beauty, instead of telling her to come to me if she needed my services. Time was too valuable and too fully occupied for me to dance attendance on clients any longer.

I withheld the impulse, however; and resolved to consult Lady Judith before I replied to the letter.

At five o'clock I found myself free and on the way to Eaton Square.

Lady Judith was in, and the footman showed me into the library. She looked up at my entrance as if surprised.

“Anything happened?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I'm glad to find you in. I want your opinion on *this*.”

## Queer Lady Judas

I handed her the Countess's letter. She read it quickly, and then looked at me.

"Well . . . what is the difficulty?"

"You know we arranged that all appointments must be made at the rooms. It wastes so much time going to and fro."

She nodded. "I know; but this is an exception. You must pay your first visit to *her*. Then explain your rule. Afterwards——"

"I am surprised that she has heard of me already!"

"Why should you be? Your advertisement is in all the leading papers—*Queen, Gentlewoman, Lady, Field, Pictorial*. Of course, she has seen them. Besides, her set know of you through me."

"Are you pleased that she has written? She is a personage of importance, isn't she?"

"Rather," said Lady Judith, grimly. "But I fancy her sun of glory is nearing its setting. But now sit down and have some tea, won't you?"

My thoughts flew to Julie Thibaud. I had been away all day, and had an uneasy sense of neglected duty.

"No, thank you," I said. "There is all my correspondence waiting for me."

"But you have a secretary. Why need you hurry back on that account?"

"Because I must explain or dictate. And I like to get it all done before dinner."

"Well, please yourself. There's always a satisfaction in doing one's duty, because it's sure to be disagreeable. Come and dine here on Friday, will you? I shall be interested in hearing what you think of this paragon of beauty."

"But judging from what I saw at the theatre——"

She moved impatiently. "My dear child. Of course! She's all artifice. She's as unreal as a—mirage. Except her figure. I grant that is magnificent. And then she's

excessively vulgar, which Society adores. It is its present synonym for wit. The art of conjugating its favourite verb *s'encanailler* in all its moods and tenses ! ”

“ That is what Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley proclaims as the art of success,” I observed, thoughtfully.

“ She’s right. *Chien, chic, diablerie* — those are the charms of a popular favourite. They are essentially the charms of my Lady Rip. Well, good-bye, if you must go ? You won’t forget Friday.”

“ No. I shall be very pleased to come. No party I hope ? ”

“ Only Paul. But that makes two to one. Not but what women always are *that*. Shall I ask Archey. You seem to like him ? ”

“ I do. He is a type of the modern youth, with whom I have had no previous acquaintance. Frenchmen are so different.”

I took another cab home to make up for lost time.

I found Julie quite calm and rational. I questioned her as to her day, and found the acute symptoms had been less distressing. She seemed tired and languid, but otherwise decidedly better. We set to work as usual at the correspondence, and it amused me to dictate those formal lines to Lady Ripley that I would be with her at the hour she had named on Friday morning.

Julie asked if she might go to bed as soon as her work was finished, and I readily agreed. Natural sleep meant half the cure. The quiescence of disturbed mental faculties ; the readjustment by Nature of all that delicate, minute mechanism which we sum up in the one word “ brain.” As if the brain were but the machine and human will its propeller. As if the emotional, coloured life of the intellect were the mere slave of the lower faculties ; degraded by the senses instead of controlling them !

I hailed with satisfaction every sign of improvement, and I spent my leisure hour after dinner in penning a long,

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confidential epistle to Dr. Jules Gautier, telling him of the case, and explaining my method of treatment. I had always been deeply interested in all matters of science and physiology. Under Dr. Jules' influence the interest had strengthened. During our years of friendship he had been a harsh and pitiless teacher; but one true to his own convictions, and always ready to prove those convictions for his pupils' benefit.

It gave me keen satisfaction to unveil my mind once more. To speak frankly of feelings and experiences under this recent change of circumstance. I knew he would be as interested as myself. As eager for developments. As curious as to cause and effect. I gave a rapid summary of my present conditions and what had led to them. I described Lady Judith as the woman-puzzle she was. I made no secret of my conviction that her position in society was that of a watchful spider, whose complex web was a secret to all but herself. While writing these words, the memory of the Jew money-lenders' letter flashed again across my mind. I laid down my pen and crossed over to the bureau and unlocked one of the drawers.

There it lay in its envelope as I had received it. I took it out and once more read the address of the firm: Abraham, Neugasse, Krapmann & Co., Old Jewry.

Again I thought how odd it was that a woman of high social position should be on terms of intimacy with such people. Terms that linked them with a visiting list, and public entertainments.

I replaced the letter, and wondered if the circle was narrowing. If Lady Judith's web enmeshed these strange flies also. If she lurked in some secret corner, intent on schemes that would mean destruction? And, if so, why? There came no answer, but surmise; and surmise is scarcely evidence, even in one's own Court of Law.

I finished my letter, and addressed and closed it. "My life is getting interesting," I said to myself. "Undoubtedly



the looker-on sees most of the game. Also, it seems, I am expected to play a part in this special game."

Half unconsciously I traced on the paper before me the names of the players. They ran in the sequence of my knowledge of identity; and apart, and yet of them, myself and Paul D'Eyncourt, and Paul D'Eyncourt's mother.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Friday morning found me *en route* for Park Lane, it also found me in a state of acute personal curiosity.

So far my aristocratic clients had been comparatively grey sheep. They all had their little *historiettes* attached to their names, even as they had their pet dog, or mon-goose, or lizard. Such things represented mere eccentricity; a polite yielding to social requirements, which had vetoed marital fidelity as *démodé*, and placed an "unattached" woman in the pillory of ridicule. But my present subject of interest had, from all accounts, out-Heroded Herod. Her fleece was not neutral-tinted, but uncompromising black. Often as I had heard her name, I had never heard it spoken save slightly or opprobriously.

I wondered how such a damaged reputation could yet float on the sea of social publicity. How, with husband and children in the background, she could play fast and loose with her position. But these were just the odd, reckless things that women did, and were permitted to do, as long as they kept out of that one Court of Enquiry which furnishes the press with Evening Editions.

The mansion in Park Lane was more a *maisonette* than a mansion. The footman asked my name, and then went off to acquaint his mistress or her maid.

I waited some moments before he returned. Then he told me to walk upstairs, where a smart maid met me, and led me into Lady Ripley's boudoir. I had seen many beautiful rooms in my time, but I confessed to myself that I had never seen anything quite so lovely—or so perfect in costly appointments and uncommon schemes of colour

and decoration as that boudoir. Evidently money had been no object when it was designed and furnished. In a few moments the door opened, and the famous owner appeared. She seemed just fresh from her bath. Her lovely dark hair, all natural ripples, was loosely gathered at the top of her head; a gown, transparent and rosy, floated about her, showing all the perfection of curves and lines that had made her figure renowned as herself.

Yet what I took in of her face in my first swift glance was not a revelation of beauty. Her eyes were too small and set too close together. Her mouth too large and full. But, on the other hand, her nose was exquisite as that of a Grecian statue. Her head was beautifully shaped and set on her shoulders; and her skin of that warm, ivory whiteness which is so rare an accompaniment of dark hair and eyes.

"Ah, good morning! You are Madame Beaufort, are you? I've been hearing your praises on all sides. Come into my dressing-room. Never mind the dogs; they won't hurt you. Down, Kipling; down Kitchener. Celeste, put Kitchener in his basket, and take Kipling round the park for half-an-hour. I shan't want you. (What do you want, my angel? To come up in my lap? Very well, then, but you mustn't bark; that's naughty.) Madame Beaufort, I adore dogs. I've got a dozen or so about somewhere. But this is my special idol. He's a Jap, you see. He was given me by one of the Embassy people. (Lie down, my beauty. No, you mustn't eat hair-brushes. They're bad for you.) Have you got everything, madame? Hot water is there in the silver jug. Oh, you *do* steam—I was wondering. I heard it had gone out. Loosened the skin. Have you many people? I suppose so. You've done yourself very well, I hear. Hanover Square, isn't it? So glad it's not Bond Street. What with Palmists and tea shops, it's as tiresome as a Charity Bazaar. I suppose I can talk—I never can be silent

for more than one minute at a time. Now *do* tell me who's come to you? Has Mrs. Dickey Johnson? I thought so. And her double—the Audley woman. You bet! Those two always copy each other. Well, *do* you think Dickey so pretty? She's abominably proud of her skin. Of course, she told you that. And—tales out of school, eh?—a little made up, isn't she—for all she pretends?"

"No; she's perfectly genuine," I said.

She gave me a sharp glance. "Honour bright? Well, I thought it was very well done. But still—*done*. (Divinity of my heart, keep still or I shall slap you.) Isn't London perfectly odious just now? I'm off next week. . . . The Quorn. I had to come to town for a new habit. Hunting is my passion. Everyone expects me to break my neck. I say I'd rather die in a ditch as I am now, than in bed with nurses and doctors and people looking at you, and telling all your friends how hideous you were. That's the kind sort of thing women do."

Her voice was harsh and metallic. Her hands unaccountably restless. They were ugly hands, too. Large and coarse—with sharp knuckles. Her numerous rings drew attention to these defects. Birth or breeding had no advertisement in these tell-tale exponents.

"Of course, it's ruinous for one's complexion," she went on, closing her eyes as the perfumed steam stole over her face. "At least, one lot of women say that, and the other say it's the finest thing to face wind, and rain, and fog. What do you think? My skin's not so bad, is it? Of course, I go to Paris for treatment every year. But I heard you had the French method, so I thought I'd try you, How perfect heavenly that is! I wonder why we call a thing heavenly when we can't possibly know anything about heaven till we've been there? That's so like us! You didn't practice in Paris, did you? I've a *pied à terre* there, and often run over. But I never heard your name.

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What's this wonderful stuff they're all talking about? Eau de l'Enclos, isn't it? (My dream, you mustn't growl! Its rude.) Have you brought any? I've such heaps of things. Sometimes I don't know what to use, or what to avoid. If one *believed* all the advertisements of the Beauty Specialists there needn't be an ugly woman in London. What a misfortune that would be! Do you publish the same tarradiddles? Of course, we don't believe them, but we keep on buying the things. I think women are great fools. But men are worse. Have you seen the new corsets? The men's, I mean. Lord Framley showed me his at lunch yesterday. He was so proud of them. They were pale-blue satin, embroidered in rosebuds. I had to send the servants out of the room. We were all women, except Ernie, so it didn't matter. It was screaming! He has all sorts. For riding, and walking, and evening dress. I believe he even has a pair for sleeping in. *Such a waist!* Only twenty-three inches. Do you know him? He's one of the curiosities of London. He simply worships clothes. He has about three hundred suits, and he dances better than any ballet girl. He's just going to Egypt. I wish—— No, I don't. I'd lose the hunting season. Do you believe in palmistry, Madame Beaufilet? There's a wonderful Russian going about who's a perfect demon of magic. Can read your future in your hand as well as your past. He absolutely terrified me. He gave me a warning, too. He said I had an enemy, merciless as death, and who would consummate my downfall. Did you ever! Of course, I didn't believe him. I know I've hundreds of enemies, but I'm game to fight them all, or——"

She made a contemptuous gesture, and then sank back against the cushions of her chair.

"I wonder why these fortune-tellers are so popular," I said. "What you said about Bond Street is quite right. It is full of them. Do you ever think——"

I paused abruptly.

"Think—— what?"

"Think how dangerous it is to leave your secrets, your history, your actions at the mercy of these charlatans? Think of the power it gives them— of——"

She sat up suddenly. "But one never *acknowledges* that they are right. At least, I don't. I laugh, and pay their fee—and say 'Not a bad guess,'—and go my way rejoicing. Oh! they don't get 'a rise out of Oi,' as Chevalier says."

"But I thought that this Russian alarmed you by some warning."

"Did he? I've forgotten all about it. One hasn't time to think of such nonsense. Why Ernie Framley said that the man prophesied he'd be a bankrupt in twelve months. Ridiculous! It's a sheer impossibility. No one would dare sell him up. Credit is the one thing we *can* exact from those hateful people who invented bills and 'accounts rendered.' For my part I never look at a bill. They're too contemptible! (Angel! how restless you are to-day!) I'm afraid he doesn't like you, Madame Beaufilet. He thinks you're hurting me. It's just the same if anyone kisses——"

She broke off and laughed. "Now let me see what you're doing? You'll make me up a little, of course. But, on your oath, never *breathe* it."

"I hope I know my duty to my clients better than to need such a caution," I said, coldly.

"There, don't get huffy! I know what women are. They must chatter, and there's no chatter so interesting as about each other. I like your method. How many treatments can you give me before I go to Leicestershire?"

"I cannot give you any more at your own residence, Lady Ripley," I said. "I made an exception to-day, at great personal inconvenience. My rule is that all my clients should come to me."

## Queer Lady Judas

"Oh! but my dear creature, that's impossible! Think of it! Why, I'm as well-known as—as the Achilles' statue yonder. If I were seen going in or out of any massage place, people would say—— Well, perhaps you don't know how ill-natured they are. Oh! I couldn't do *that*. I'll fix an earlier hour; pay you a double fee, if you like, but you must come *here*."

"It will be extremely inconvenient!"

"But only for a week. And I suppose three treatments would do? Are you making so much money that you can afford to be independent? Lady Ormaroyd told me you began in quite a small way, but that in two months you were a brilliant success."

"I am a success," I said, quietly. "And therefore able to dictate my own terms. There are plenty of my profession ready and willing to give home treatment. But if people want me they must come to me."

"How gloriously independent."

She bent forward as she spoke, and gazed at her face in the mirror. Gazed with rapt eyes and quivering lips. The little dog raised itself from her lap and leant its small paws against the plate-glass slab of the dressing table. Its quaint face was reflected beneath that of its mistress. Its eyes met her eyes. It whined softly. But for once that mistress was inattentive. She drew a long, deep breath.

"Ye gods! How beautiful you have made me—and how *young*!"

She rose and stood gazing as if she could never satiate her admiration.

Then she turned abruptly. "Ask of me what you will, even to the half of my kingdom! Only promise—*promise* it shall last."

I shook my head. "Nothing lasts," I said. "Beauty *least* of all. It has only one secret."

"What is that?"

"Youth," I said.

She frowned impatiently.

"Your art is a very perfect imitation."

"But for all that, you must remember it is only—imitation."

"You differ from the generality of your profession," she said. "As a rule they flatter one that the imitation is the reality—or rather it is only imitation because founded on reality, and really ever so much better! Decidedly, this *is* better."

She gave an odd, harsh little laugh.

"There's nothing so satisfactory to a woman as the knowledge that she looks beautiful, no matter how she does it. If your treatment will make me look like *this*—I'll come to you every day I'm in town, and pay you anything you choose!"

### XXIII

"So that's the wonderful Lady Ripley," I thought, as I went back to Hanover Square. "I wonder if all society women model themselves on one pattern; that of rattles. Disagreeable rattles, I should call them, in contradistinction to Goldsmith's definition. Noisy, silly, chattering. How they do chatter. Is it a trick, I wonder? For they all do it. Running on, on, on, like babbling brooks. Afraid of stopping for fear someone else should have a chance. Never listening, or listened to. That's the art of modern conversation. Putting Lady Ormaroyd, Lady Ripley, Mrs. Dickey, Mrs. Audley, and Archey Templeton together, there's not a pin's head of difference. They're nothing but talking machines, set going by the one impulse—to make sufficient noise to attract attention. The only wonder to me is how they keep it up. Assuredly, they never say a thing worth remembering. Certainly, they exemplify the saying that 'A woman's a bore when she's serious, and a fool when she's not;' which, taken as criticism on conversational powers, leaves us with less conceit than our brains deserve."

Throughout the day I wondered at the extreme poverty of material I had garnered for Lady Judith's benefit. Sift the chaff of silliness as I might, there was no discovering a grain of corn amongst it.

At half-past seven I found myself telling her this. We were alone in the library, and I thought she looked strangely ill and worried. She reverted more than once to my description of the Countess. She asked for minute details



—for personalities. She desired an accurate inventory of all the beautiful and costly things that surrounded her.

"But I thought you were on visiting terms," I said, at last.

"*Were*;" she repeated, "but not now. Not for years."

I was silent.

Suddenly she lifted her head and looked at me. "Did she pay you?"

"She gave me a cheque in advance. She said she would come every day."

"I suppose everything you use is perfectly *safe*! I mean, no fear of injury to the skin, or——"

"Lady Judith!" I exclaimed, indignantly. "Why I should no more dream of using harmful chemicals than of administering poison!"

"I am constantly forgetting how honest you are, my dear!" she said, sarcastically.

"What made you ask such a question," I said. "Had you any reason?"

"Why should I? It was only a memory of something; of someone. She was a Society beauty, and renowned for her lovely complexion. Suddenly, we heard she was ill. Then she went abroad. No one ever saw her again. But last year, when I was at Homburg, I left the beaten track and came home through Bavaria. One day, in a little out-of-the-way town, holding no tourist's records, I met a woman being wheeled about in an invalid chair. She was thickly veiled, but her face, even through the veil, was awful. It was a bright, raw, flesh-colour; the sort of colour that is under the natural skin, revealed only by a scald or wound. She had powdered it thickly, and wore, as I said, a very thick, white veil. But, changed as she was, I recognised her. In fact, I spoke. At first she tried to pretend that I had made a mistake. I insisted, and, at last, she confessed. Poor wretch! how miserable she was! Her worst enemy would have pitied her. Her husband had gone off with

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someone else. She had never had a child. She had lived for the world and her own vanity. Now, both had fled. With the loss of her beauty came the loss of all she had known in the days of that beauty. And the cause of it all was the use of a lotion. Some stuff sold by that infamous woman who was exposed in Dublin. You remember?"

"A good many women have cause to remember *her*."

"Well, poor Lady Harkaway was one of those victims. There I left her, in that out-of-the-world little foreign spa—living out her wretched existence by the aid of morphia."

"A pitiable history. Yet—what moral adorns the tale, Lady Judith, that you tell it to me?"

She smiled; that queer smile I had learnt to know.

"The moral that applies to all feminine vanity. It cannot brave accident; it cannot defy Time."

Before I could answer, the door opened, and Paul D'Eyncourt and Archey Templeton entered. As I shook hands with them I noted that the immaculate youth looked unusually excited.

"I am ~~analysed~~!" he said. "The greatest scandal of the day is at hand. The Earl of Ripley is going to divorce his beautiful Countess."

"What?" exclaimed Lady Judith, staring blankly at him.

"I heard it from a friend in the Law Courts. It's quite true. The action's filed. One evening paper has given hints. Unless some enormous pressure is brought to bear on the irate complainant—as on a previous occasion—there will be one of the finest 'show-ups' ever known in modern times. The co-respondents are as sands upon the seashore. They cannot be numbered. I'm not surprised that the worm has turned. It appears he draws the line at—*islands*."

Lady Judith still said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on his face. "Are you *sure*?" she said at length. "It's not a mere—canard?"

"I have it on the best authority. The Earl was not shooting big game in the Himalayas, as supposed. He was employed in watching his own fair lady's little game at home. Result—what I have told you."

"Dinner is served, my lady," said the footman, at the door.

Lady Judith rose and took Paul's arm in a mechanical way. I and Archey Templeton followed.

"A distinct breach of etiquette," he said, very softly. "But all things come to him who knows how to—scandalize. Witness my present luck. Also observe the satire of conventionalities. Wars may rage—death may claim—divorce may threaten, but, serene and unalterable as the Law of the Medes and Persians, there sounds in our ears the callous voice of sacred custom—'Dinner is served.'"

But though I laughed as usual, my thoughts had flown to that discrowned queen. To her threatened disgrace. To probable loss of name and position. Her stately homes—her love of luxury—her *prestige* as a leader of Society, all gone! Why—what Dead Sea fruit it all was! Bitter dust and ashes—cruel degradation. Who would hold out the right hand of fellowship? Who would stand by her side to prove the worth of friendship? And what a lesson to other "skaters on thin ice." To all that reckless host who were not in the least afraid of doing wrong, but horribly alarmed at being found out.

"Does she know, herself?" I asked Templeton, suddenly.

"Know what?"

"That there is to be a case?"

"I suppose so. The lawyers would inform her."

I remembered the morning, and remembered how cool and indifferent she had been. She could not possibly have known of the blow so soon to fall; or, did she know, and was she bent on preserving that world-renowned beauty in order to hold one sure anchorage at her disposal when the *cause célèbre* had ceased to be a nine days' wonder?

## Queer Lady Judas

I found it hard to turn my attention to generalities. Hard to respond, as usual, to Archey Templeton's chatter. We all found it a relief when Lady Judith dismissed the servants, and we sat over coffee and cigarettes, and could speak freely. She was not charitable. She turned the full glare of search-light on past doings of this very scandalous person. She seemed to have an inexhaustible store of damning facts, such as go to play the comedies in that famed Court of Probate and Divorce.

Whatever the Countess had sown, there was no doubt she would reap a plentiful harvest. For a few moments I found myself pitying her. No woman, had she the audacity of Phryne herself, could face such a storm as would blow over this woman's reputation, once the sleuth hounds of the law were loosed on her track. I was conscious of some wonder that she had escaped so long. For certainly the list of her misdeeds narrated by Archey Templeton, and endorsed by Lady Judith, was a long as well as a black one.

Paul D'Eyncourt said very little. But he stopped Archey in a peculiarly suggestive anecdote by a sharp rebuke.

"The retailers of scandal are as bad as the makers! If this unfortunate woman had only disgraced her sex, all else could be condoned. It is because she has disgraced her *set*, and because her exposure may reflect upon them, that she will be ostracised."

Archey stared at him.

"My dear fellow! don't get so waxy over a demirep of this description. Believe me she wouldn't care a snap of the fingers for your virtuous championship."

"Paul has managed to retain one spark of chivalry," said Lady Judith. "He always takes the part of the oppressed. To him women still have something of the angel, even under the rule of Fashion, and the demoralization of Bridge."

"A woman may have the faults of her *set* and yet keep true to some tradition of womanhood; free of that sweeping

classification of all into one common dust heap. Besides, so long as one woman is pure enough and brave enough to set an example, she redeems the others."

"You don't quote the—example?" sneered Archey Templeton.

"Is there any need? I think even you might reverence the highest and noblest Lady in the land."

He rose and lifted his glass, and drank to the health of—the Queen.

We followed his example. Nothing more was said on the subject of the Ripley divorce.

In my own heart I felt myself wishing there were more men like Paul D'Eyncourt, even while I laughed over Archey Templeton's cynicisms.

Perhaps that was why I let him see my annoyance later on, when we had gone into the adjoining room for music.

"Our friend 'the Prig' is in great form to-night," he said.

"The term is not in the least applicable," I answered, sharply. "I, as a woman, am thankful to find a man who will stand up for my sex. There are plenty to run it down!"

"It has shown very plainly that it only desires its own championship."

"It will need it," I said.

"But to need and to gain are not exactly equivalent. However, there's only one thing a woman likes better than making rules, and that is—breaking them."

I laughed. "It doesn't seem exactly apt either as a quotation or an epigram. But there's a grain of truth in the observation. It may also account for the success of Women's Clubs. But please don't talk any more. I want to listen to Mr. D'Eyncourt's singing."

"You shall; on condition that you will grant the same attention to mine."

I looked at him. "Have you another novelty with which to surprise us?"

"Oh! I don't always play the buffoon."

"Hush! you two," exclaimed Lady Judith from the couch, where she was lying. "Paul is going to soothe my troubled spirit."

We stopped talking, and Paul D'Eyncourt began to sing "Bright Star of Eve." Then he gave Tosti's "Serenata." Lady Judith lay back against a pile of cushions, smoking scented cigarettes; her eyes half closed; her face expressive of content.

"Now—that thing of your own," she said, as he paused at last.

He coloured. "Oh, please—no. That was only for our private amusement."

"I want to hear it," she said, "it does me good."

He said no more, but began to play the prelude. Archey Templeton lit a fresh cigarette with an affectation of indifference towards a rival composer.

Paul's song was a curious ballad. It told the story of a soul that was to win its way from purgatory, if, in an hour's sojourn on earth, it found a heart containing one pure thought.

The search was described.

The seeker dived into the heart of a child; a maiden; a priest.

The child's thought was of greed; the maiden's of vanity; the priest's of ambition. Despairing, the spirit paused and gazed on earth, for the hour was approaching its limit. Swiftly he passed in review the pageant of Life. Amidst it all was there no pure simple thought such as might win a soul's salvation?

Then, suddenly, on the highway, came trudging along an old, half-starved, beggar woman; and, as she stumbled, footsore and weary along the rough road, a lark soared skywards from a field below, and soaring and fluttering,

burst into song. The beggar stopped, and raised dim eyes to the blue heaven and the tiny speck that meant a living rapture, and in her heart she cried, "God, I thank Thee that the sky is blue and the sweet bird's song is glad, and that I am alive to behold the one and hear the other. For the dead see no more how fair is Thy world, nor hear Thy praise, nor sound it. And, therefore, because I live I thank Thee, and bless Thy Holy Name."

And as the troubled spirit read that grateful heart, the burden and the pain fell from his own, and while the bells of earth chimed forth the hour, he, too, soared heavenwards—forgiven.

The poem was beautiful in its simplicity, and Paul had set it to a melody as simple. But the feeling and the passion in his voice lent it a charm beyond expression. The story became real. The grateful beggar's prayer was solemn as some sacred chant. The wild rapture of that pardoned soul thrilled through triumphant chords, and, through them, spoke of those strange longings that make the mystery of human hearts, and their despair.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Paul rose from the piano and approached us.

I looked at him. I knew my eyes were dimmed and blurred, and I was half ashamed that such should be the case. And when I said "Thank you," my voice and words sounded far away. The bald tribute to his power was so inadequate, that I grew angry with myself because I could say nothing better.

Even Archey Templeton was stirred out of his usual indifference. He murmured, "You surpass yourself, dear fellow. To write music as well as sing it—and sing it so that others *feel* it, is to enter the lists of Art. Perhaps that is your intention?"

"No," said Paul. "Dilettante sermons would never satisfy me. I am too convinced of what I lack to challenge comparison with those who possess it."

"Ah! that is false modesty," said Archey. "It is always those who 'rush in where the thing-em-bobs fear to tread' that get the best of life's prizes. The quotation is faulty, but the application is obvious."

"If I were you, I'd turn composer to-morrow and win the fame I deserved."

"That depends on your definition of fame, Archey," said Lady Judith. "Modern fame means getting into the papers, and being interviewed, and having your photograph published, and your autograph sold at bazaars. It means a noisy notoriety, as annoying as the hissing of a kettle on the boil. It means that you must puff and blow your own little bladder of air till it bursts; for the moment you stop, it will collapse, and everyone will wonder what that little scrap of skin and dust means, or has ever meant!"

"That was very well said," murmured Archey, approvingly. "Almost worthy of myself."

She puffed a cloud of smoke into his face. "You are an impudent boy. Go to the piano."

"After *that*! Impossible my dear lady. Even my conceit stops short of the heights of Olympus! I only profess to amuse. Our friend D'Eyncourt has touched that exalted standard which cries 'Excelsior!'"

"Comparisons are odious; but contrasts are the salvation of art—and artists. Go and do what I tell you. I am in a mood to be obeyed."

"But I don't feel inclined for fooling," grumbled Archey. "That's the worst of your Society clown. He must always wear his motley. You even grudge him a Bank Holiday of his own. Can't we play Bridge?"

"Madame de Marsac doesn't know the game."

"I'll teach her. It will be delightful."

"I would rather hear you sing," I said. "I am not fond of cards."

"A woman of to-day who has the courage to say that in a London drawing-room, and before two noted Bridge



players, deserves to be canonized. Saint— What is your christian name, Madame de Marsac ? ”

“ Cécile,” I said.

“ Oh ! then it has been done already. Accept my reverence.”

“ I would rather have your song,” said I, laughing.

He went to the piano.

## XXIV

I REFUSED to permit Paul D'Eyncourt to come home with me.

The night was cold and wet, and I was thankful when I found myself in my tiny snuggery. A bright fire blazed, and Barbe Piccotée had left the chocolate pot prepared.

It was not yet midnight, and I felt unusually alert and wakeful. I threw off my heavy wraps, and sat down by the fire to sip chocolate and read the letters that had come by the last post.

There was nothing of any importance. Just as I tossed them aside, I heard a door open softly, and Julie Thibaud came in. She had thrown on a dressing-gown. Her hair lay loose about her shoulders. She came quickly up to the fire and knelt down by my side.

"I heard you come in. I wanted to tell you that this is the first day I have—escaped."

I sat up and looked at her white face and shining eyes.

"You mean no paroxysm ; no pain ?"

"I mean that the pain was bearable. My father came in for an hour, and we were talking ; and for once I was not reminded of the time. He—oh, Madame ! I had no idea that he loved me so well !"

She sobbed brokenly, but it was natural self-remorse. No longer frenzy or hysteria. I laid my hand on her shoulder. "I told you that your cure would mean all the joy of his life. The news you give me to-night is most welcome."

"He does not know—nor do I—why you should be so good to me—to him."

"I don't know about—goodness," I said. "There are things that happen—that come in one's way, and yet, if accepted, turn into duties. I have never felt as if I could turn my back on any human cry for aid. A starving child—a homeless beggar—a suffering man or woman. But, mind you, Julie—I would go out of my way to avoid the suffering, or its knowledge. I don't *wish* to face it. Yet, when it is there at hand, I am bound to do something—if I can."

"That is goodness, madame. It is doing what God has put in your way."

"Are you a Catholic, Julie?" I asked her.

"But, yes, madame, of course. Only I have been very wicked of late. I have not made my confession for nearly a year. It is different with my father. He never misses Mass or Saint's Day if he can help it. He told me that you are of no religion. That you believe in nothing. It is of that he spoke so much. I said no one so good and kind as you could be without religion."

"But I am," I said, bitterly, "I could not count the years since I entered Church or Chapel; since I read any book that was not intended to destroy all grounds for belief."

"But, how then are you—— what you are?" she asked. "So much sense, so much cleverness—so much kindness—that is not mere chance or accident. God gives you a pure soul, and by its light you live. That is what I have been told."

"Ah, my child, there are thoughts that go deeper than priestly theology. Every religion has its advocate; and to such advocates all the rest of the world seem lying in outer darkness. Yet the world is none the worse for the refutation of one creed—or the acceptance of another."

"I cannot say. I am not clever enough to argue. I only know that I have been very unhappy and very wicked,

and that I shall not find peace until I have once more sought God in His Sacrament, and made my confession."

I stared at her. Could this be Julie. The frenzied, hysterical, selfish girl who had seemed bent on wrecking her life but a few short weeks back. If so, then, indeed, drugs were devil's agents—even if unattested as such by medical science. I took my hand from her shoulder, and gazed thoughtfully into the fire.

"Go on talking," I said. "Tell me first what your faith seems to you, now that you have groped your way back to it. I have only reckoned with Will and Thought as the controllers of material things. But I am ready to hear the other side. The accepted side. The side that men proclaim with their lips, but falsify by their lives. The side that has made Christ's story and Christ's sacrifice of none effect. Go on, Julie. Tell me how you feel, and *why* you feel it. I am tired of looking into the black void of spiritual darkness. The white mists of faith will be a relief!"

She talked on for half-an-hour or more, and I listened with scarce an interruption. But all the time I was asking myself what miracle had happened. Whence had emerged this new Julie. This girl, with eager interest in her eyes, and the zeal of the proselytizer on her lips?

Surely there must be some truth in a power that so suddenly and forcibly manifested itself. Her words, too, made me distinctly uncomfortable. I had been used to argue with cynics, with atheists; with men, who living in the very core and centre of Catholicity, yet denied it root and branch. I had judged the "true" Faith from its exponents; and seeing all the petty tricks and falsified vows of the so-called *religieux*, had cast all aside with one sweeping condemnation, "By their works ye shall know them."

Show, pretence, grasping greed, secret immorality, iron-handed tyranny; these things I had witnessed, read of, heard of again and again.

It was new to me to recognise a truth underlying it all, and strong enough to reclaim the morbid indifference of a Julie Thibaud. I felt as if I had suddenly entered the door of some quiet sanctuary. As if all the meaningless, flippant irreverence that was the world's cheap coinage, had for once rung false in my ears. The girl's sketch was light; was often confused; but underneath lay that consciousness of *reality* in what she professed, which is the dominant note in the scale of all religions and all creeds. Without it they are tuneless and cold.

When at last she ceased speaking, I looked at her excited face with a sense of wonder.

It struck me suddenly as strange that I should be sitting here in the firelight listening to the religious views of a girl I had half despised. I seemed to see the amazed faces of Lady Judith—of Archey Templeton—of all that crowd of glittering meretricious womanhood who sought my services day by day! Was this reality, and was life the dream? A fantastic nightmare, where shadows chased shadows until the gates of disillusion claimed entrance fee for death.

I sighed heavily. I had never felt quite so lonely as in that moment.

We both rose, and stood looking into each others faces in a long silence.

"I am stupid. I can say so little, and I say it so badly; but oh! madame, if you only knew the joy of being able to *feel* again; of knowing I dare to pray!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Lady Judith had said that "Contrasts were the salvation of Art." To me they seemed the interest of life. The people I met revealed themselves to me with a frankness that spoke either limited intelligence, or unlimited trust. My stage was no longer empty. It was crowded with a multitude of personalities, each claiming attention, or arousing curiosity.

I often felt inclined to remind my fashionable clients that their confidences were less discreet than might have been advisable. I wondered if to them I was but a machine; an impersonal necessity like their servants. The case of the French Countess, whose frankness before her lackey was rebuked, occurred to me. "Do you call—*that*—a man!"

In like manner I seemed to be considered "not a woman;" at least, not an intelligent one. Often I felt inclined to say—"Do you ever think that every time you leave one of these places you leave behind you another woman's knowledge of you; another woman's contempt for you? Your secrets are at her discretion, to betray, or to keep. Do not fancy she is a mere automaton—this woman, who holds your face in her hands, and studies its signs; who reads the story of your passions—your weakness—your vices. Who knows the touch of Time, and follows his landmarks. Who laughs in her sleeve at the lies your lips frame, and recognizes to the full the charity of your friendships."

Often such thoughts surged up within me, and sometimes I wondered if a day would ever come when I might speak them as freely. If some lucky chance would ever lift me to a pinnacle of independence, and leave me at liberty to proclaim truth!

And, first, and foremost, came my Lady Ripley. Thickly veiled, unannounced, bent on learning secrets I refused to sell; full of one thought only. Her beauty—and how to preserve it. She had no idea, of course, that I was acquainted with her present perilous position. That, perhaps, a few months would see her dethroned and despised. Her name in every mouth. Her life's story at the mercy of every penny-a-liner of the Press. Her social prestige a thing of the past.

As yet the *cause célèbre* was only on the lists for hearing. It had not become common property.

She was so anxious to continue the "treatments" that she begged me to see her even on Sunday. As my rooms were closed on that day I told her the only alternative was to come to my flat. She agreed even to that, and stayed for an hour, undergoing the beautifying process which had so delighted her. Her usual mood of satisfaction was only disturbed by the fear that this process would not be proof against Nature's freaks of weather, or the harsh realities of the hunting field.

"If it could only *last*! If I thought I could look like that under any circumstance or condition," she exclaimed. "Isn't it possible Madame Beaudelet? Is there *nothing*—nothing reliable?"

I shook my head.

"Time and weather," I said, "are our worst enemies. The ingenuity of Art can't fight the realities of Nature?"

"Nature is the most odious and detestable thing in Creation! Nature either gives us the wrong colouring, or takes it away just at a critical moment. She crowns us with hair of a shade we detest, and eyes that don't suit it. She plays the pranks of a clown with our figures, and turns life into a cloister-house of penance. Just when beauty is desirable, we begin to lose it. Talk of Providence!"—(She laughed bitterly)—"Providence is only a genie of malice. He creates us for a whim, and destroys us for another! There's something at least might have been left us by any considerate Frankenstein. Our hair and our teeth! We should at least go out of life *looking* decent!"

"How do we come into it?" I asked.

She gave an affected shudder. "Yes, isn't it humiliating and deplorable! Any woman with the courage to become a mother ought to be forgiven every other sin in life."

"It certainly places vanity low down in the scale," I said, "seeing that there is nothing to be proud of in our entrance or our exit."

She suddenly seized my hands. Her own were hard and tense, almost as a man's.

"Look here! she said. "It is a vital necessity that for the next six or seven years I should remain as I look now. As I look when you have fixed me up. If you can tell of anything—of any *way* by which to keep like this, I'll pay you down a—— a thousand pounds! There; I mean it!"

The blood flew to my temples. It was a bribe, certainly—and my natural instinct was revolt. Besides, there was only one way of doing what she required, and *that* I had vowed never to breathe—knowing the awful penalties attendant.

I released my hands.

"I am sorry, Lady Ripley, but you demand impossibilities. Art is only the handmaid of my profession; it has no magic gifts of perennial youth, or unchangeable beauty."

She sighed heavily, and stood looking at herself for a long moment. Then she put on her hat.

"If ever you should discover such a means as I suggested, promise to come to me. The money is yours."

I made no reply.

"Good-bye," she said, with a smile, "I'm off to Church Parade!"

I opened the door and rang for the lift.

"Church Parade," I thought, as her scented furs and laces vanished from sight. "And all that scandal in the background. Have these women no sense of decency or honour!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon I called on Lady Judith on my way to pay that promised visit to Mrs. D'Eyncourt. She had lately insisted on a daily record of all Lady Ripley said or did in the frank seclusion of the dressing-room. I mentioned the Countess's strange request that morning.



"Well, that can be done," was the answer. "If she comes to-morrow tell her there has recently been a new discovery, by which a woman can regain the youthful skin of childhood."

I looked at her horrified.

"Lady Judith, don't tell me you advocate that awful *skinning* process."

"You know of it?"

"Of course. It was quite a nine days' wonder when the Countess Maurice went through with it. And there was an Englishwoman who followed her example. But don't you know the torture, the risk, and, after all, it only lasts a few years!"

"My dear," she said, with her queer twisted smile, "have you never read Hans Andersen's story of the mermaid, who for love of an earthly prince sacrificed her fish's tail for a pair of feet? Well, the tortures that she underwent for sake of *love* are nothing to the tortures women will undergo for sake of vanity. The Pearl of Sark, as they call her, knows perfectly well what she has to expect for sake of a complexion that has made her notorious. At most it can last but seven years. Then the process must be repeated for a second time, to last for a period still more brief."

"And there is no *third*," I said. "You know that?"

She nodded. "Even the Devil must tire of waiting on the follies of women!"

"But you would surely not have me advise Lady Ripley to go through such an ordeal?"

"Why not? If she is vain enough—she is also fool enough. Try her with the suggestion."

"I dare not. I wouldn't have the responsibility on my——"

"Which is it? Soul or conscience?" she asked, mockingly.

My face grew hot. "We will call it conscience. Were Lady Ripley my worst enemy, instead of being merely a

woman I despise—and yet pity—I would not advise her to do such a thing as you suggest!”

She rose quietly from her chair, and faced me where I sat beside the fire.

“Cécile de Marsac,” she said, sternly, “I am sorry to have to remind you of certain conditions underlying our bargain. I raised you to your present enviable position. You may be sure there were hundreds of others I might have served—and made my willing slaves. But I chose you because you were a woman of courage, of honesty, and possessed of no sentimental or religious foibles. I knew a time would come when I should require a service of you in return for my efforts on your behalf. I hinted clearly enough that, should such a time come, I would expect obedience from you. Unquestioning obedience. What if I tell you that the time *has* come, sooner than I expected—or dared to hope—but it is nevertheless welcome?”

Her eyes searched my face, cold, and glittering, and hard as steel. For my part the suddenness of this revelation had come as a half-dreaded shock. My old suspicions reverted to my mind. Had I not always feared that something lay behind Lady Judith’s interest, Lady Judith’s philanthropy. Now, like a flash, I saw it all. The motive of revenge. Revenge on one special woman. I had no need to name the woman. A hundred minute details crowded that open page of revelation. Hatred, jealousy, spite, contempt; and something deeper, crueller, underlying them all.

I tried to collect myself and answer her calmly.

“I know I am a dependent of yours,” I said. “And my sense of obligation is very deep. I know, too, that you said you might one day ask a service at my hands. Perhaps it would be best we should understand each other clearly? Has the time come for that service? and what is its nature?”

She moved slowly back to the couch. She seated herself, and clasped her wrinkled, be-ringed hands tightly together. She no longer looked at me, but into the glowing heart of the fire. And, as I waited on her silence, I saw her face grow set and rigid as that of a sphinx. It was the face of one obsessed by a single over-mastering passion. The face of one whose heart was stone; whose will relentless.

"The time *has* come," she said, at last. "I must let you into my confidence. I must unlock a chamber long sealed and consecrated to grief."

I saw her hands tremble, but her face was quite calm. She suddenly glanced at the clock, and then at the door.

"Lock it," she said, sharply. "We must not be disturbed."

I obeyed her, and then resumed my seat.

"To begin with," she said, "I married late in life. At an age when most women have foregone dreams of romance. I had no romance. Love and all its follies are for beautiful women—women with charm. I had neither beauty nor charm. Life spread for me but a Barmecide feast of ugliness, rank, and poverty. Yet they brought me a suitor. He wanted the prestige of my rank, I wanted to escape from loneliness and poverty. We married for those reasons. I detested the man, and he assuredly had no affection for me. Yet, strangely enough, of that detestation and indifference was born a flower of love, so beautiful, so pure, that the barren desert of my miserable heart became suddenly a garden of joy. I was the mother of a son! From the days of Eve, even to the present era of discarded duties and opposed obligations, there is no relationship can touch that *one*. My child seemed only mine. His little life was hope to me, his dawning intelligence fed my pride, his beauty was a daily wonder. And every year bound us more closely in sympathy. To him I was never ugly, never dull, never uninteresting. I would not send him to school. I dreaded other influence. He had tutors and teachers, but I superintended all his lessons. He

had his own pony to ride, but it trotted always beside my carriage. If I went abroad he came with me. Music was his passion as it is mine, and I let him hear the best, and gave him the best instructors. He grew from child to lad, from lad to youth, before his father's interest awoke, and the question of the boy's future had to be settled. But even then, as our wills clashed, Fate saw fit to intervene. My husband died. Henceforward life meant for me only my son. For his sake I valued the wealth at my disposal, and studied financial duplicity. I wormed my way into secrets and methods of business that to most women are only a name. I fostered the boy's artistic ambitions, because in them I saw a future still shared with me. The world and its claims would never mean to him what Art meant. And so, foolish-wise, as mothers are, I let him remain—dreamer, poet, artist. I never thought of safeguard for the life that he must face. I never paused to remember that to a soul wrapped in dreams and fed with idyls the breath of the world comes as the breath of a destroyer—a pestilence, a scourge, that blasts all youth and beauty, and turns the garden of promise into a desert. But though the world is foul and its breath a poison it is not yet so foul or so soul-destructive as the influence of a bad woman! I had not thought of such a danger. I had mixed very little in Society—home had larger interests for me then. But do not imagine I placed any restraint upon Bernard. I was not so unwise. He had his own friends—his own amusements. A suite of rooms was entirely at his disposal. But he never went in or out without coming to see me. He rarely accepted any invitation without giving me its particulars. And I was perfectly happy in my love and trust. Every year we went abroad. But, generally, to quiet and beautiful places where the crowds never came, and of whose names Society was ignorant. One year——”

For the first time she paused in that rapid recital. For the first time she changed her rigid attitude. A dark purple

flush suffused her face, and made its paint and powder stand out like a mask. With a great effort she controlled her emotion.

"As I was saying, one year we went to Nice. It was in January. We arrived there on the 30th."

Her eyes suddenly turned to the brass-mounted date-rack on the writing table. It stood conspicuously in the centre. The date it showed below this present month of January, was the 30th.

"Nice was crowded that year. We went to the *Méditerranée* but every room was engaged. Then we tried the *Hotel des Anglais*. They could accommodate us. We dined at the *table d'hôte*. He and I had a table in the window. Opposite to us were a large and seemingly very gay party—English and French. One of the Englishwomen I knew slightly. We exchanged bows. The action attracted the attention of her companions. They all looked at us. I paid no attention. I was studying the *menu*. Suddenly I heard Bernard say, 'Mother, look at that lovely woman!' I followed his glance. It was very rare that he noticed women or questioned of them. She *was* lovely. I could not deny it. What you know now as the Countess of Ripley is a mere travesty of the radiant beauty of that night. She had not come into the title then, she was only Lady Dulbrooke. The boy never took his eyes off her, and she soon noticed his attention. For the first time in my life I suffered the pangs of jealousy. I had to sit quiet and look on at those subtle arts by which a woman excites a man's interest. Not a glance, a movement, of this woman, but were coquetry and provocation combined. Not an inflection of voice, not a note in her laughter, but had a meaning; and he—well, such a woman was a revelation—he was drunk with her beauty, and mad with longing to know her; and she knew it. What use to dwell on details. He had his way soon enough, and from that hour the woman held him, body and soul. How can I tell you of the change; of the

frenzy that possessed him ; of my warnings and his disregard. I knew she cared nothing for the boy. Never has that soulless sensualist cared for anything or anyone, save her own vile self ! But I could not make him see her in her true light. Our first and only quarrel was on account of my determination to leave the Riviera and return to England. He refused to come. He allowed me to make the cold, wearisome journey alone. He remained behind with this syren. In a few days he wrote, asking for money—a large sum. He had a liberal allowance, but would not come into his own share of his father's wealth until he was of age. He had never asked for money before. I knew *why* he now demanded it. Against my better judgment I sent it. But my heart was sore over our disagreement. I could not have borne a second one. Again I implored him to return. I pictured the results of his infatuation. I pointed out that she was a married woman, that she would one day have a great position. I spoke as plainly as a mother could speak of sin and dishonour, and their awful penalties. He never answered my letters. I heard he was always with her—by her side at the gambling tables, at the balls, everywhere. His name was a jest. The sport of the idle vicious crowds who thronged the promenade and haunted the Salles des Jeux. All that he had to give, his youth, his love, his dreams, his faith, his art, were thrown at the feet of a worthless woman !

“I lived on in the dreary London house, writing, hoping for his return. At last he wrote to say he was coming back. It was then the end of February. I searched the lists of fashionable intelligence. I knew the reason of his decision. She was leaving Nice also.

“We met, and I did my best to seem the same ; but the change in him half broke my heart.”

She paused now and turned her face aside. “Even that first night of his return he would not dine at home with me. He pleaded an engagement. I let him go, asking no question.

There is always *that* hour in a mother's life. . . . She must stand aside and be silent. Her boy is no longer her's. It was a hateful home-coming. The first of all the many we had known that found us—divided. Listen now to my life's tragedy, and tell me if I am not justified in my hatred of—a murderess!"

She sprang to her feet and clutched at the mantel-shelf, her queer, unwieldy body swaying to and fro. I rose instinctively and put my arm round her shoulders.

With a savage gesture she threw me off. "*Don't!*" she cried. "He used to do that. No one else shall ever do it!"

I moved quietly away. That paroxysm of grief in one always so self-controlled, was a terrible revelation. How much tragedy lurks unknown in a human heart!

"Please say no more," I entreated. "It is too painful."

She struggled for composure. She faced me once again with dry and burning eyes.

"I have chosen to break the silence of years. I have chosen you to listen. You must hear to the end. You must—judge."

## XXV

THE painful story went on.

There was something almost grotesque about that rigid figure and that tragic face. I kept my eyes averted. With all my soul I pitied her; but any expression of such pity was wholly inadequate to the tenseness of the situation.

"I told you Bernard left me alone that first evening of his return. He had the grace to murmur regret, a half-hearted apology, that showed me, as nothing else could have shown, the horrible change in him. But I hid my hurt. I pretended it did not really matter, and then—as the door closed on him—I fell on my knees and cursed her; that vile harlot who sat still in honour at her husband's hearth—before the eyes of the world—and yet was traitress to both. That night he did not return. I lay awake for long, miserable hours listening for his step. It had never been soft enough to escape my ears. The grey dawn broke. He never came. The hours of the day went on. To me they seemed as years. I was too proud to question the servants. It would have seemed as if I were not in his confidence. It did not occur to me that anything but his own will detained him. The morning became afternoon—and I thought every moment would bring him. I rang for tea. Then countermanded it. I would not have it until he returned. . . . At last there was a sign of life in the hall. A ring—steps—voices. But I did not move. I sat by the fire, waiting. And then suddenly it seemed to me as if all the street was alive with noise, and shouts. I heard the voice of a newspaper-boy,



shrill and clear—and it was answered, and caught up—and echoed again. I found myself listening. ‘Dreadful suicide,’ were the words. “Gentleman shoots himself in Park Lane!” ‘*Dreadful suicide!*’ . . . I have heard those words in my heart from that day to this. . . . I shall always hear them, I think. And, yet, I have held my hand—and waited. I wanted her cup of infamy to be filled to the brim. I vowed that she should know the agony she had dealt to me! . . . Now—you know.”

The tears were in my eyes. Her own were dry and glittering as ever. “They did not bring him home—” she went on. “They found his address and came to tell me. I heard what they said—and all the time those boys were shrieking out their news—and passers-by giving their half-pennies for the paper. I could not understand at first. I could not think it was Bernard they meant. But when I realized—when I *knew*——”

At last her stern composure gave way. A tearless sob burst from her breast—and her hands went to her face and hid it.

“For months I lay in utter blank darkness, knowing no one. Feeling nothing. When my senses returned I prayed for death. At times I almost resolved to claim its release. But one thing stayed my hand. One thing. I would not leave him unavenged. I would pay back to the uttermost farthing that debt of wrong and dishonour. She was abroad when—when I looked back at life once more. I had time and to spare for my plans and my purpose.”

Her hands dropped. Over the tearless misery of her face broke an unholy joy. “Step by step—bit by bit—shame on shame—so has my vengeance grown and fastened upon her. She has thought herself free; but I have woven a thousand toils for her reckless feet. She is pledged in name, in honour, in infamies uncountable. She owes me sums that are impossible to pay. When I choose to enforce my

demands she will stand before the world beggared of wealth, of home, of everything she holds most dear! But she has one possession still on which she counts—her beauty!"

The words struck sharp and shrill as the lash of whip in a pitiless hand. "It has saved her again and again. She has fooled men and won their pity, their possessions, their aid. Even now, when final disgrace threatens her, I know of a hand stretched out to avert it. A hand so powerful that her long-suffering, miserable husband must perforce obey its directions. But the sorcery she wields has reached a day of reckoning. Let her beauty perish and her lovers will fly like sheep; the women she has wronged will be as ravenous wolves! *That* is the fate I have chosen for her. Poverty; shame; disfigurement! So shall she face the world she has fooled, and the hearts she has broken."

She sprang to her feet, and began to walk up and down the room. The dusk had closed in. The only light was that of the fire. I said nothing. What could I say? The picture I had been shown was so awful; the vengeance I was called upon to aid, so merciless. In a flash I saw the pitfall dug for this spoilt beauty. All the tangled web of debt and broken promises, and foolish extravagance and costly splendour, that had been spun for her and around her. Wicked and heartless as she was, I yet felt sorry for the ruin invoked so recklessly. For the earthquake that would shake her fabric of possession to the dust.

How clear the whole plan looked. How skilful and how pitiless!

I watched that stormy figure with a new interest, a reluctant admiration. I pitied her as I had never thought to pity living woman. Great, indeed, were her wrongs, and well-nigh unforgivable. Yet when motherhood is but a name, its wrongs, like its pangs, lay less claim on the imagination.

I felt a sort of horror of this long, relentless vengeance. Working in dark and tortuous ways; working steadily, remorselessly, for the ruin of a sister woman! A swift revenge, however brutal, I could have understood, but not this deep-laid scheming. With that intrusion of the commonplace, which so often turns tragedy to bathos, there came the knock of the footman at the door.

"Would her ladyship have tea served in the library or drawing-room?"

I turned to her impulsively.

"Oh no, please *wait*. I—I want to think."

She dismissed the man, and then came back to her seat and looked across at me.

"I have told you everything, except what part I wish you to play. Events have progressed more rapidly than I anticipated. The first warning of the storm will reach her to-morrow, when her creditors state that their patience has reached its limits. Her husband will not pay her debts, even if he stays the divorce proceedings. Ruin will stare her in the face. She will be desperate. Her first thought will be an appeal to one of the rich fools who seem fit objects for the pillage and licensed robbery of titled cocottes. I could—almost—name the one to whom she will fly. He is a coarse brute; the newest discovery in millionaires, and he is infatuated with her. Now comes the point when I need your assistance. She must—in one hour—*by the merest accident*, lose all that beauty of skin and colouring of which she is so vain. In plain words—the woman who comes to you for the aids of your art, must leave your room disfigured for life! Never again shall the eyes of man or woman look at her without horror and disgust. Do you understand?"

I rose from my chair. "Yes," I said, "I understand. What do you propose I should do—or give—or use?"

"It will be perfectly simple. You will say that you have found such a remedy as she desired; that it will erase

every tell-tale line, and leave the skin smooth, clear, satiny as a girl's. Then you will use a lotion that I will give you to-night. An hour after she leaves your rooms, the beauty of the famous Countess of Ripley will be a thing of the past."

I said not a word.

She broke the silence almost fiercely. "Why don't you speak?"

"I—I cannot," I stammered. "Only, if you are asking *me* to do this dastardly thing, I refuse."

"Refuse? Do you forget that I have *made* you! That my money and my recommendations have set you up, and given you a prestige unattained by any other of your profession!"

"I don't forget it. My gratitude is sincere. But for all that, Lady Judith, you have not bought my will."

"And your will is opposed to mine?"

"In this matter, yes."

She rose. Her face looked grey and death-like. She steadied herself with one hand against the mantelpiece, the other was pressed against her side.

"Have I waited and planned, and built up my scheme—to have it crushed at the moment of its perfecting! Do you forget the conditions I made?"

"Such an action as this was never mentioned in those conditions, otherwise I should have refused consent, as I do now."

"Why do you refuse it? What is this woman to you more than any of the other fools who claim your services?"

"She is nothing to me," I said. "I despise her utterly. Never so much as since I heard your heart-breaking story, Lady Judith. But I can't trick a woman so basely as you suggest. Even at the risk of offending you irretrievably I must stick to my refusal."

*She remained silent—save for her laboured breathing.*

"Can you not be content with what you have done?" I went on, hurriedly. "You say she is ruined and dishonoured. Is not that sufficient?"

"No!" she hissed, fiercely. "Eye for eye—tooth for tooth—life for life. That is what I have sworn to exact. That is what I *will* exact. My child's blood clamours yet at that harlot's door! My child's murder calls to me for justice on his murderess!"

She shook from head to foot with sudden, gusty sobs, that seemed tearing the very life from out her bursting heart.

"Oh, don't! *don't!*" I implored. "It is awful! I know. I feel for you more than words can say. But I am sure, all the same, that such vengeance as yours would only recoil on your own head!"

"Let it. What should I care! Year by year I have woven this net for her feet. Bitter fact by bitter fact I have gathered and stored the evil deeds and merciless treachery of her life. Now—when the whole thing is complete—when I have but to stretch out my hand, and claim my reward, you bid me stay it. I tell you I will *not!* I defy law, mercy, humanity! I stand alone—a woman wronged beyond all pardon. I would take my bruised and bleeding heart, and all I own, and have, or care for in this world, and pile them on this pyre that means to me but—justice. But, in the flames I light, she shall perish—and perish, too, in the sight of all that world which has so long made her its idol!"

The fire sent out a sudden spark of flame, and showed me that bent and trembling figure, and that grey, awful face. All semblance of womanhood had gone out of it. It was nothing but the hideous mask of passion as hideous.

I drew back instinctively. I felt dazed and sick. And then suddenly there rushed to my lips words heard in years long past; unheeded—half forgotten.

"Vengeance is not man's—but God's. Has he not said, 'I will repay!'"

Never to my last day of life shall I forget the shriek of mocking laughter that pealed across my faltering voice.

"Scripture on *your* lips! *You*—to speak of God, who don't even believe in his existence! God, who looked on at a wanton's tricks, and saw a pure and innocent life sacrificed for her sake! God, who took the one thing I loved in all this vile and cruel world. God, who struck my soul to the dust as a lightning flash strikes a solitary tree! Oh—go—go—! Even you must play the hypocrite in my hour of need! Even *you*—whom at least I trusted and believed in."

"Lady Judith!" I implored.

She stamped her foot furiously, and, raising her trembling arms, shook them in my face,

"Go! I tell you! *Go*! or I will not answer for myself!"

Shamed, and sick at heart, I crossed the room and unlocked the door. As I opened it, I glanced back, and saw her totter to the couch and fall upon it, sobbing.

## XXVI

IN some blind, mechanical fashion I blundered out of the house and into the street.

That laugh still rang in my ears. Those furious words were echoing in the air about me. The scene looked more grotesque, more horrible, as I recalled it. I had never lived through such an hour, nor dreamt that a woman's passions could be so merciless.

Again in the cold darkness of the streets I felt my face flame. Why had I invoked that long forgotten Name? Why so suddenly brought a denied argument into the question. I could not tell. It had been impulse, but impulse stronger than my own power of denial. It was a truism, so fitted to the occasion that I had been impelled to speak it, even in the face of ridicule. It seemed the only possible answer to a wild vindictiveness. Yet now as I pictured that stricken and miserable figure, so lonely amidst the splendour of wealth, so helpless despite its power, I felt all my heart go out to her on a wave of compassion.

What would she do, I wondered, to complete her scheme? What might she *not* do in anger at my refusal to help in it? The question pressed home. My prospects were, after all, but a card-house at the mercy of every breath of change. And what breath so fickle as that of woman. My sudden rise into popular favour might be attended by a downfall as sudden. If Lady Judith were really in earnest, and I had but played a part in her scheme, then my abrupt refusal to complete it might provoke retaliation. True, I could trust once more in my own resources, and continue my profession

on a humbler scale. But what would my fashionable *clientèle* say to such a sudden change? There had been curiosity enough about my wonderful establishment. I knew how much I owed to that curiosity. But if the whole fabric disappeared suddenly as Aladdin's palace, I felt I had no resources of explanation left behind.

The sudden flash of lamps in a wider thoroughfare brought me back to every-day life, and a sense of haste misdirected. I was far out of the route of Queen Anne's Mansions. I looked around. I saw the quiet Sunday throngs; the crude Sunday garments; the clean British respectability returning homewards from its afternoon walk to the homely luxuries of tea and toast. I wondered if its lot was happier than my own. A passing hansom drew up as I stood there; forgetful of the lateness of the hour, I gave the man Mrs. D'Eyncourt's address and drove off.

I recalled her sweet, grave face with a sudden longing. In my present condition of strained nerves and perplexity, I craved the relief of just such placid peacefulness as had seemed to emanate from her presence. Here at least was a type of womanhood that had retained its modest and primitive virtues. A woman whose views of life and its manifold mysteries were based on the simple foundations that an excellent meaning lurked behind. I was sure she had never attempted to question that meaning, it would have seemed wrong. Involuntarily I found myself wishing that I could have rested content with similar trust in the principle of "Whatever is—is best."

As I went up to her "eyrie," I was appalled at the lateness of the hour. I felt that she must long have ceased expecting me.

But I was wrong. The maid showed me in at once, and I found myself facing Paul and his mother as I murmured apologies.

I thought how comfortable they looked, and how happy in that simple, homelike room. I wondered, too, why all



restraint and formality vanished at the mere touch of Mrs. D'Eyncourt's hand, and sound of her voice. Why there seemed nothing for me to do, save just be myself.

She insisted on having fresh tea brought in, though it was nearly half-past six, and she made it herself to prove her right to be called old-fashioned. To her, hospitality *meant* what the word represented as its meaning. It was only when I drank that tea that I knew how faint and unstrung I was, and how keenly alive to the delicacy of sympathy that had read my weakness.

She helped me to remove my heavy cloak, and she managed to talk on, and at, and with Paul and myself, in such a fashion that I seemed to be saying a great deal, instead of being nominally a listener.

When I was rested and refreshed, she quietly sent Paul from the room on some errand. As the door closed, she turned to me.

"Now, my dear, what is the trouble? You have been making a brave fight, but I know you are upset. If I can help or advise, don't hesitate to ask me. And be sure I shall respect your confidence."

I felt the tears rush to my eyes. How long ago was it since any woman had spoken to me as this woman spoke. As I looked at her face, its sweet and simple goodness came like a breath of healing over my sore and sad perplexities.

Involuntarily I stretched out a hand to meet her own half-way.

"How did you guess?" I faltered.

"You are not the same woman I saw at the theatre," she said, softly. "My first glance at your face told me you were in trouble."

"Oh! I am!" I cried. "But it is not my own, altogether; another person is concerned in it."

"I don't ask you to betray confidence; only if I can help you, say so."

Then, in bald, broken sentences, I tried to give the outlines of my dilemma.

She listened quietly.

"I understand the obligation. And this—this condition is quite impossible, you say."

"Quite. It means lending myself to a scheme of revenge, and the—the person concerned has never harmed me."

"You know her?"

"By repute, yes. She is not a good woman, and she has committed one horrible sin against the——"

"Against Lady Judith?" she interposed quietly.

I was silent.

"I think I know the story," she went on. "It is a terrible one. It has made me very tender with this strange and maligned woman. I, who am happy in my son's love and confidence, how can I judge harshly of any less blessed mother."

Still I said nothing; listening to the fall of the ashes in the grate; resting in the quiet sense of comfort of that quiet voice.

"I can follow out the train of circumstances by the light of my own knowledge," she went on. "Nothing short of the moral and social wreck of this woman will content that other woman she has wronged. But I fail to see why you should be drawn into the scheme?"

I shuddered—remembering how brutal a part I *had* been expected to play in it.

"It appears," I said, "that, all unwittingly, I have given Lady Judith cause to look upon me as a mere tool, ready to obey her bidding. Something with neither conscience nor honour. To-night came the clash of wills. When I refused her commands she threatened to withdraw me from my present position."

"Would that be so very terrible a punishment?"

"Frankly, it would. I have a woman's natural pride *in success*. That it was so easily achieved meant

nothing. I had hoped in a few years to know the sweets of independence. Then I should be free to give all this up; to live the simple, homely life of just—a woman. It may not seem a very notable ambition, but it meant a great deal to me. I have never known much happiness.”

“Poor child,” she said, softly. “But you are still young. You have not parted with youth’s best friend—hope. And let me tell you that I do not believe Lady Judith will carry out her threats. She spoke probably in passion. In the natural anger of finding an opponent instead of a slave. But when she grows calmer she will see you were right. You are fighting for a principle, and you do well to fight. Besides, there is a business side to be considered. For how long did you make this arrangement?”

“It is a yearly one. But terminable at a month’s notice should either of us see fit.”

“Then you could be turned away in a month, if she chose to exercise her power.

“Yes,” I said.

“And in that case what remains?”

“I must go back to my first insignificant beginning. The trouble would be how I am to explain to people that I have failed. It would be a financial advertisement of failure. If you saw those magnificent rooms—the style in which everything is done, and then—my own poor little flat.”

“But, my dear child, the women who believe in you and your methods would follow you into any insignificance. Besides, could you not attend at their own houses?”

“That wastes so much time, and my leaving Hanover Square would argue a want of success——”

“Of course,” she said, thoughtfully. “But another point occurs to me. Is there nothing else you could do? Are you not fit for something better than such a profession as this?”

I laughed bitterly. “I cannot teach,” I said. “And to—cook—I am ashamed. What is there for a woman to do?”

All channels are full to overflowing. My experience of nursing, of course, might be turned to account; but what does one earn that in any way repays the hours of toil and anxiety; the strain on mind and body? Treatment that places one on no higher level than a domestic drudge, paid so much a week for her duties! I have no talent for the stage or the music hall. I should love to write, but the literary life means waiting for years in the ranks, and starving while you wait. No one should enter those ranks who has not an independent income. I might go to America—that paradise of women workers; but I have not the brains, the push, the audacity that is necessary for notice or encouragement. I could not be the hired attendant on lap-dogs and valetudinarianism, nor the patient attendant on fashionable caprice. No; I passed all these occupations in review before I decided on my present one. But I thought Fate was for once hurrying matters. A rapid rise often predicts a rapid fall for other things than—stocks."

"Don't adopt this bitter tone," she said. "I would rather see you suffering than hard."

"I have had enough of the one to make me the other."

"He will not suffer us to be tried beyond what we are able to bear," she said, very softly; and the quotation brought back the closing bathos of that stormy scene with Lady Judith.

I sighed heavily—wearily; and on the burden of that sigh Paul entered. His glance rested on her face; on mine.

"Am I intruding?" he asked; "or what conspiracy is being hatched?"

"I have been giving Madame de Marsac some advice," said Mrs. D'Eyncourt.

I looked up. "Oh! you may tell him," I said. "Perhaps Lady Judith has already prepared him for contingencies."

He came forward quickly. "Contingencies—of what nature?"

"A month's notice," I said. "It sounds rather like a servant, doesn't it? Somehow in the deed—that night—it didn't seem quite so possible."

"Possible? But you don't mean to say——"

"I only mean that Lady Judith has made my position conditional on certain lines. I couldn't agree. The result is perfectly plain."

His face looked sterner than I had ever seen it.

"I drew up that agreement," he said. "There was no mention of such conditions."

"Even if there was not," I answered, coldly, "I could not maintain it against Lady Judith's will. I have been unfortunate enough to displease her. Probably you know that she is not a woman who takes kindly to opposition."

"She does not. But also she has many whims and caprices. This may be one."

I rose from my seat. "I have paid you a most unconscionable visit, Mrs. D'Eyncourt," I said, as I took up my cloak. "But I feel so much the better for it that my apology should mean a compliment."

"May I not see you home?" asked Paul, eagerly.

"No," I said, sharply—and then coloured and murmured a conventional "Thank you. I would rather be alone. I must be alone."

He, too, coloured; at the rebuff, I supposed. "I beg your pardon. I had no idea of intruding," he said, stiffly.

But being in no humour to heed fine shades of feeling, I merely turned to his mother and bade her good-bye.

"You will come again soon. Do. I shall be so anxious."

"If I may," I said. "I should like to, only——"

"Don't make excuses. Try and look upon me as a friend. I think you need one."

"Indeed I do," I said, brokenly.

\* \* \* \* \*

I walked to the Abbey and entered that quiet close, with its ancient houses and dim lights, and air of past ages

brooding ever over the threatened change of Time. I could hear the notes of the organ rolling over the silence. The sweet voices of the choristers floated out on waves of melody. And again I asked myself the old vexed question: was there anything in it all? Anything save the superstition of generations dead and gone linked to the memories of generations present and to come. A blind, persistent force working on and on in men's minds. Helpful only by reason of imagination, of bigotry, of blind fear. To worship a Deity for mere sake of escaping Eternal Punishment had always seemed to me the worst and weakest argument of Christianity. The threatened child becomes either a coward or a hypocrite. Surely the threatened soul shares the same fate. A fate challenged by its own powers of self-deception. Yet the greater number of civilized beings were actuated solely by that fear of punishment; by the old primitive instinct of pacifying what they feared by sacrifice and atonement.

Could there possibly be a Personal Good Power and a Personal Evil One—and did these powers really contend in perpetual strife for the poor struggling flies of humanity entangled in the Web of Destiny?

To and fro I paced the quiet pavement, allowing all the solemn influences of scene and hour to subdue the passionate storm-waves of previous emotion. I had a faculty of permitting myself to drift away from painful thoughts or troubled memories. I gave that faculty full play. I forgot Lady Judith, the infamy of society, the uncertainty of my position, the gentle counsels of Paul's mother, the stress of suffering in the world around. I pushed them aside as things impersonal. Above me spread the blue, star-sprinkled immensity of the sky. Towards it in the gloom stretched that lovely slender spire built by man's hands for God's service. Did He value either the labour that it meant, or the service that it consecrated?

Within, priests bowed and prayed, and preached; within, a vast crowd listened. Yet if the Trump of

Doom sounded at this very moment; if this great vaulted space opened—as they professed to believe it would open—would priest or worshippers be one whit more prepared for the doom thus heralded than I, the Doubter, who stood without?

## XXVII

A TELEGRAM the next morning informed me that Lady Ripley would be at my rooms at ten o'clock. Such an early hour and special appointment argued importance. I set off immediately breakfast was over. Julie asked to accompany me, and I gladly consented. I always preferred to have her under my own eye, and I also knew that any distraction was good for her under present conditions.

Almost to the moment the Countess arrived; heavily veiled as usual; and, as usual, dismissing the quiet little brougham that brought her.

The moment she had seated herself, and the door was closed, I saw that she was labouring under some intense excitement.

"Make me as lovely as you can," she said, hoarsely. "A great deal depends on it."

I looked at her dilated eyes and quivering lips, and noted the unusually restless movements of her hands. I recognized signs of mental tension in the throbbing veins of her forehead.

These were not favourable conditions for my handicraft, and I told her so.

"You are right. I am frightfully worried. But it will be all right in a few hours, and then I am off out of London."

"To Leicestershire?" I asked.

"No; to Paris."

I echoed the words in the stupid, surprised way that marks surprise.



"Yes. Paris." She leant her head back and looked at me maliciously.

"I have found out the secret for myself, you see."

"Secret?"

"The secret I offered to pay you for. The secret of youth restored. When you see me next——"

She closed her eyes and smiled. My hands paused in their work. Had her enemy found another agent after all?

"Lady Ripley," I said, earnestly, "*Do* tell me what you mean? I know there is one method that claims to do what you want; but, believe me, I should never advise anyone to try it; the penalty is too awful."

"Nonsense. Of course there is a little pain—inconvenience—but what of that, when one sees one's skin has returned to girlhood? All wrinkles and lines vanished. What would anything else matter?"

"But it does not last," I said.

"It will last as long as I want it. Seven years. Seven years of loveliness restored. Why, for *that* I'd be content to face death!"

"That—or worse—is what you *will* have to face."

"Nonsense. Several women I know have had it done. One—that lovely Mrs. De Lancey—why, she looks as young as her own daughter!"

"And in seven years," I said, "she will be a hag—an object. You cannot defy Nature without incurring Nature's penalty."

"Oh! Nature—that old bugbear! We always are defying her, and snapping our fingers in her face! Don't waste words, Madame Beaudelet. I'm resolved."

"Would you mind telling me how, or where you heard of this cure?"

"I've been trying to get the address of the Paris magician for some time. I only succeeded last night. A friend gave it me."

I breathed freely. It could not have been Lady Judith. Had Fate really stepped in and taken the matter out of her hands, and mine.

"I wish you would treat the matter more seriously," I pleaded. "First of all there is dreadful suffering—agony indescribable. It may endure two days—or longer. Then the new flesh is horrible—pink, raw, unnatural; for weeks you cannot expose your face to the air—to anyone. Remember that; and remember also that you are at the mercy of hired attendants; that they may betray what you have done."

"Everyone is betrayed by everyone now-a-days," she said, recklessly; "that peril does not frighten me! As for the suffering—there's always chloral—or the *piqure*."

I felt a thrill of disgust? What use to talk to such women? Callous—godless—heartless; their own vanity their only idol, for whose sake they were content to sacrifice every other good gift of life.

I went on with my usual task mechanically. It afforded me neither pleasure nor satisfaction. Once or twice I found myself wondering whether the "smash up" had come; whether creditors had yet pronounced their *ultimatum*; whether social disgrace was hovering on the threshold of that Park Lane mansion? Lady Judith had pronounced to-day as the Day of Reckoning. How did the transgressor propose to shelve responsibilities?

She was strangely silent. Evidently the worries in the background were not to be evaded.

When she was finished, and had examined the result, she turned to me in that odd, abrupt fashion of her's.

"My dear woman I've something to ask you? Can you lend me a hundred pounds?"

I stared at her in blank astonishment.

"A hundred pounds?"

"Yes; to-day, at once. I'm rather in a tight corner for money. You shall have it back in a week, I promise you."

"I don't possess such a sum," I said, quietly.

"*What?* with all *this*?" She waved her hand round the costly and beautifully appointed room.

"I am only put in here to work up the business. I have a monthly salary, and a certain percentage on profits at the year's end. That is my position."

She looked annoyed. "Fifty—then?"

I coloured. "I'm sorry to refuse you; but it's out of my power."

She gave a short, harsh laugh. "As a rule your profession is less disobliging! I'll pay you twenty per cent. interest."

"It's quite impossible, Lady Ripley."

"I suppose you think you've got all you can out of me!" she said, insolently. "That I'll not need your aid when I come back from Paris——"

"I hope you will not," I said, quietly. "And, please, excuse me for reminding you that I have another appointment."

She tied on her veil with savage tugs, and said no more. Neither did she wish me good-morning, nor answer my question as to whether she desired a hansom called. She only swept through the rooms—a silk-lined hurricane—and vanished from my sight.

I little thought under what conditions I should see her again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day went on as usual. With every post I looked for a letter from Lady Judith containing that "month's notice" I confidently anticipated, but none came. I wondered if she was considering the matter. If, as Mrs. D'Eyncourt had said, she would, in a calmer moment, recall her threats. In any case there was nothing for me to do save go on as I was going, and wait on events.

Still when the days numbered another week I felt impelled to call on my queer benefactress. I had the usual excuse of the weekly accounts to take her. The footman who

## Queer Lady Judas

answered the door merely uttered the formal "Not at home. I handed him the parcel with a request that it was to be given to his mistress.

"Is she quite well?" I asked.

"No, madam; my lady has kept her room for some days."

"Has she a doctor?"

"No, madam. Her ladyship's maid suggested it, but her ladyship refused."

"Is Mr. D'Eyncourt in?" I asked suddenly.

"Yes, madam."

"I wonder—I mean, will you ask him if he could see me for a moment?"

The man showed me into the room where we had all had supper, and a moment later Paul came to me there.

I thought he looked worried and anxious.

"Is Lady Judith really ill?" I asked, as we shook hands.

"Yes, I believe so; but I haven't seen her for a week. She writes or sends me messages. She has not been downstairs since last Sunday.

"That eventful Sunday!" I said.

"Yes, that scene evidently upset her."

Remembering it, and all its harrowing details, I was not surprised.

"I have heard nothing," I said at length. "Every day I have expected a message, but none has come."

"I have been overwhelmed with business," he said, in a sudden, tired voice. "Lady Judith has so many financial schemes—is concerned with such odd businesses, that it is as much as I can do to disentangle her correspondence."

"Tell me one thing," I said suddenly: "Is she Judas et Cie?"

"As much as she is 'Beaudelet.'"

"And what of Lady Ripley?"

"Haven't you seen the papers? There's been a fearful show-up. The creditors came down with one fell swoop. *She herself* has disappeared."

I did not say that I knew where, and for what reason.

"It seems strange that Lady Judith should be connected with such business, such people. A woman of her rank and position!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It has been her life for years. She may have confided her reasons to you. She never troubled to tell them to me."

"For hatred of one woman!" I said, suddenly, "or many? There are more than one who will regret Lady Ripley's downfall. Is it certain?"

"Unless she can pay up. There'll be no more compounding, I'm afraid."

I remembered the radiant vision that had left my rooms bound on an important errand. Perhaps——

Well, victims were plentiful. She might have succeeded. Might have found a new Cræsus, whose gold would stave off this crisis, and set her afloat once more on the smooth waters of successful achievement. She was a woman of great personal charm and singular audacity. Such women can generally hold their own, even against heavy odds.

"Well," I said, breaking the long silence, "I must be going. I have left the accounts as usual. I suppose Lady Judith has said nothing about—me?"

"Not a word. My mother has been full of enquiries; she expected you would come to see her again."

"I will come to-morrow," I said; "I am rather perturbed in mind. You see, I have been expecting my *congé* and it has not come yet."

"I fancy you need have no fears. I think Lady Judith would rather respect you for your courage in holding your own. It must have been an unusual experience."

But I could not smile, with the memory of that grey, anguished face still before my eyes.

"I am so sorry for her," I said. "So truly sorry; and I

am afraid she won't believe it. Won't ever be friendly again."

"You lead rather a lonely life, do you not?" he asked.

"Lonely from a social point of view; it is full enough otherwise."

"It seems scarcely the sort of life you ought to live."

"I have no social ambitions," I said.

"But there is another sort of loneliness. Intellectual loneliness—friendlessness. My mother was speaking of it. She wondered——"

I looked up and met his eyes. "It is good of her to be so interested in me. I should value *her* friendship if I were privileged to possess it. But, I assure you, that my present loneliness, as you call it, is far preferable to the life I used to live. At first I thought the change would be unbearable. Now I am almost glad to have known it."

"I think you are a very brave woman, Madame de Marsac," he said.

"I hope I am an honest one," I answered, somewhat bitterly. "Although that word only spells unpopularity. But, really, I have seen so much of the small-mindedness, the duplicity of women, that I can only wonder how men hold any illusions respecting them."

"The world is a bad forcing-house," he said, "and a bad place for women. How can they keep their feet on its slippery highway without some stronger ballast than mere social success. In itself an unstable thing, and a danger. I am daily confronted with its penalties, and its risks. Sometimes I don't know whether I pity the tempted or despise the tempters. I only know that of all bribes offered to women, none seem of a nature to keep her on the straight path of honour."

"One wonders how and why it all keeps 'going on,'" I said; and I thought again of my own theory. But the chiming of the clock reminded me that my "few moments," had become *an appreciable* space of time. I held out my hand. "Really

I must go. I am detaining you. I wonder if you would let me know how Lady Judith gets on; or if—if she mentions my name?"

"Of course I will."

He opened the door and walked with me along the great sombre hall, where a tired footman was yawning away an existence of boredom.

"If you should go to Queen Anne's Mansions," said Paul, "will you tell my mother I may be late to-morrow. Besides—I don't wish to be absent if Lady Judith asks for me."

The man opened the door as he spoke and I went out into the dark quiet street, with a sudden memory of that last time I had left the house—with an unquiet wonder as to whether I and Lady Judith would ever meet as friends again. The blow had not fallen yet. Had she repented of her threats, or reconsidered them? In any case there was a respite for which I was thankful.

Equally thankful also was I for the encouraging success of my other scheme. The cure of Julie Thibaud. She had conquered the stage of acute craving, and as pain lessened so did desire. The habit, fortunately, had not been continued long enough to gain complete mastery over her. With every conquest the task of self-denial grew easier. I kept her constantly occupied. Later on I had determined to keep her constantly amused. Theatres and concerts were cheap pleasures that I could afford, and both appealed to her, and lifted her out of that morbid, distraught condition in which I had first found her.

To-night I had promised we would go to a monster concert at the Albert Hall, for which I had been sent tickets by one of my fair clients. I found her already dressed, and ready to help me into an evening gown. She was fond of playing amateur lady's maid.

"How well you look, child!" I exclaimed, in wonder; and, indeed, she was quite pretty in a simple black gown, cut

slightly low at the neck, and with long transparent sleeves. She flushed with delight at my words.

"Do you really think so? My hair was such a trouble."

"Well, you've managed it very successfully. Thank goodness, mine will do."

"It is wonderful how you keep it so beautifully dressed all day! I put out the blue gown—you said 'something quite simple.'"

I nodded. It mattered very little to me what I wore; I should be an unknown quantity in that vast crowd. Still, the choice of gown was becoming enough to make me glad of its selection a little later, when no less a personage than Archey Templeton dropped into the vacant seat on my right.

"Now, the gods be thanked!" he exclaimed. "I have been wondering what had become of you. I even called on our eccentric friend. I was refused admission, and the worthy secretary was too busy to be disturbed. That happened about twelve moons ago."

"Twelve hours, I suppose you mean? But, really, Lady Judith is ill. She has not left her room for a week."

"Do you know why I am here?" he asked.

"For the same reason as everyone else, I suppose. To hear the music."

"No; to judge it. I am in the important position of a musical critic. Musical critic on a new and largely advertised sixpenny venture. Most of the ventures are—sixpence. It seems a convenient coin to cozen out of the pockets of the public. Poor Public! I feel an interest in it now. I can dictate to it, and patronize it. I can expose its fallacies, and uphold my own. I can pat its brains into shape and suggest its opinions so convincingly that it believes it is the author of the opinions dictated. Oh, it is a great and wonderful thing to be a critic. Almost as wonderful as *being an editor!*"



I laughed, and introduced him to Julie. An orchestral performance silenced conversation.

With the ended applause he began to talk again; his usual inconsequent nonsense.

"Do you know if Lady Judith is really going to give that musical party she spoke of? I wish she would let me arrange it. I could bring her the most wonderful people. Pianists who can do anything but play; and singers who can do anything but sing. Art is quite independent of ability, you know; or, perhaps you—don't know."

"I had thought otherwise," I said, with becoming gravity.

"We all do, until we become emancipated from the trammels of ancient superstitions. Ancient superstitions are like ancient lights—a perpetual reminder of someone's vetoed interests. To-night we are meshed in superstitions and left destitute of interests. ('Isn't it wonderful?' as the conjurors say.) 'Have you learnt the trick yet? I'm always afraid of clever women.'"

"You are really too absurd," I said. "How could anyone give you a responsible position on a paper, of all things."

"Because, my dear lady, I have the knack that most critics lack. They are entirely devoid of humour. Now a humouresque criticism is read and laughed at, and remembered. That's why it appeals to editors. If one item in the contents of a literary journal is *remembered*, that journal is on the high road to success. I pointed out this Cuttleism (quite my own) to *my* editor. It's funny to have a proprietary right in an editor, but that's what happens to the staff. He quite appreciated it. Of course, he's very young, and hails from a land of tremendous enterprizes; otherwise I might have been taken seriously. He asked me what I knew about music? I told him, everything. That was conclusive. He sent me here, and when he sees my critique he will go down on his knees and thank the gods—fasting—for an intelligent man's

humour. I believe that's Shakspeare—or is it Miss Corelli? One never knows."

"Hush!" I said, warningly. For a fearful and wonderful female appeared on the platform, with the usual fussiness of gifted sopranos.

Archey Templeton gave a suppressed groan.

"Where have they unearthed it from?" he murmured. "I thought cremation had silenced that top 'E' long 'ere this."

But the top "E" was shrieked out as of yore, to the ecstasie delight of a shilling gallery, who evidently looked upon it as their money's worth; and yelled themselves hoarse in response to bows and smiles, and a fluttered handkerchief.

"That is what 'popular favourite' means in these benighted British Isles," groaned the new critic. "Singing the same old songs; shrieking the same old shriek; coquetting with the same old tricks. Now you know why I told my editor that I knew everything about music. Of course, I meant everything necessary for criticism."

I must confess I enjoyed his nonsense more than the concert; it was one of those monster affairs that periodically spring up to test the popularity of early Victorian survivors.

Julie seemed delighted; and for her sake I stayed on through wearisome encores, and senseless repetitions of senseless ballads, which set musical art at defiance.

Finally Archey Templeton proclaimed that his patience had reached the limits of endurance.

"Do come away, and let me take you and your friend somewhere to supper," he pleaded. "The Savoy's a bit out of our radius, but there's Prince's. Come to Prince's, and let us get the taste of mammoth mustiness out of our mouths!"

I hesitated a moment, and then agreed. After all, it would be a novelty; and the boy always amused me as no one I *had yet met* could amuse.

I whispered to Julie; and we put on our cloaks and escaped the brilliant persiflage of "Up in the mornin' airy!" with which another popular favourite came on to enchant her audience.

"I have my night brougham here," said Archey. "Proprietarily constructed for three. If you don't mind crossing the quadrangle, we can reach it without the worry of police regulations."

So we followed him. I wondering somewhat at the extravagance permitted by such a profession as he had confessed to. The carriage was a delightful *bonbonniere* of a thing. A mass of puffed violet satin, fitted with a looking-glass and cigarette holder and ash tray. It had a movable seat to let down at will, which Archey used; and, though it was somewhat of a crush, Julie and I were far too well entertained to complain.

"I can't run to a motor yet," he observed, as we bowled along. "But I live in hope. Who knows but I may be an editor myself some day! From all accounts it's a most profitable trade."

"Trade?" I rebuked.

"It has degenerated into that. Buying and selling opinions; trading for popularity; trading for advertisements. It's the advertisements that keep papers going, you know and no editor dare offend an advertiser, no matter whether he offers a hideous satire on human maladies and human credulity, or the latest indelicacy in ladies' underclothing; neither dare he publish the *truth* of anything. His life wouldn't be worth an hour's purchase. We really, in this present century, are the most perfect exponents of the art of lying that have deserved record!"

"That art holds good for other things besides newspapers," I said.

"You are right. It has a universal application. Never so strikingly evident as when a war is imminent or progressing; a royal marriage on the *tapis*; a political crisis

at hand ; or an old-established journal changing ownership. The Drama lies. Literature lies. Art lies. And Society is the most tremendous liar of all. That's why we enjoy it so much. There's a touch of fellow-feeling, tender interest, about our neighbour's sins. They not only make, but excuse our own. And, talking of sins, reminds me——"

But the light of a passing lamp suddenly revealed Julie's wide and startled eyes. He stopped abruptly ; and then confined his conversation to harmless inanities as we drove down Piccadilly to the fashionable restaurant.

I wondered whose special sins he had been on the point of divulging, when discretion had laid that warning touch upon his lips.

## XXVIII

"~~MAY~~ <sup>vous</sup> one never find you *chez moi*!" enquired Archey, as he put us into a hansom an hour later.

"I am engaged all day," I said.

"Sundays?"

"I generally go to friends, or down to some country place."

"This is pure evasion, Madame de Marsac!" he said, sternly. "I had hoped for better treatment at your hands."

I laughed as usual. "Really, Mr. Templeton," I said, "I hardly like to ask you to my insignificant flat. Still——"

"I would crawl down an area, creep into a cellar, soar to the highest flight of aerial flats for the privilege of your society!" he said.

"It is impossible to be serious with you. Tell the cabman, Ebury Mansions, Victoria Street; and—I am generally at home about six o'clock."

"I shall count the hours," he said, raising his hat, with the solemnity due to so important an action. Then he drew back, and gave the address to the cabman.

"How entertaining he is!" exclaimed Julie. "I never met anyone like him."

"Have you enjoyed your evening?" I asked.

Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes brilliant. For a moment I wondered if she was the attraction. She looked quite pretty; and her quiet, self-restrained manners were beyond reproach. Perhaps her very quietness possessed a charm for this Society *gamin*, for whom the book of

fashionable follies contained no unread page. Perhaps that was why he wished to call; to see her again.

Well, there seemed no harm in it. He appeared to me the very last sort of man to take a serious interest in any woman; and Julie was a mere girl—crude and unformed by comparison with the brilliant worldlings to whom he was accustomed.

I pushed these thoughts aside when we reached home, and resolutely denied the girl the luxury of sitting up late and the indulgence of a firelight chat. The improvement in her health was marked; but I still kept strict guard over her for fear of another outbreak.

A few more days passed on; busy, but uneventful. With each I looked for some word or message from Eaton Square, but none came. Once more I ventured to call and enquire as to Lady Judith's health. I was told she was better, and on the eve of leaving town.

This was reassuring. I resolved to write to her, and ask her to put an end to my suspense. I should prefer withdrawing from my present false position before the opening of the season.

I was hurrying homewards as I weighed these various complications attendant on a woman's whim. Just as I turned into my own street I found myself facing an impetuous figure coming up it at a rapid pace.

"Well—what have you got to say for yourself," exclaimed the familiar voice of Archey Templeton. "Many are the wrongs I have received at the hands of thy sex, but thou excellest them all!"

"Why—what is the matter?"

"Matter? Treasured on my shirt cuff is a certain address given but a week ago. And yet I have just been banished by an unfeeling lift-boy, who assures me 'no such person lives there.'"

I gave a hasty exclamation. Of course, he only knew me as Madame de Marsac; the flats, as Madame Beaudelet.

"I await explanations," he said.

"Don't you know?—I thought Lady Judith had told you—I really have two names."

"So have I. It is not unusual."

"But I mean a name for business and one for Society. Don't you really know who I am, Mr. Templeton?"

"The most charming woman that——"

"Nonsense!" I interrupted, impatiently. "Please don't adopt that style with me. I am nothing more or less than Madame Beaufeet, the face masseuse and specialist of Hanover Square."

"You!"

For once his glib tongue failed him. He stared at me in the lamplight as if dazed.

"Well," he said again, "the proverbial feather might have its will! You are Beaufeet. The woman that *all* the London women are talking about."

"Yes. I thought you had guessed it."

"Indeed, no. But it is really wonderful! Why, I've heard so much about your rooms, your methods, your charm, your beauty. Do you know I have been seriously thinking of interviewing you for my sixpenny rag."

"Will you come back to the flat now you have fathomed the mystery, and let me give you some tea?"

"I shall be only too delighted. My disappointment at my error was considerably sharpened by the fact that I had brought my literary achievement with me. I am anxious for your opinion."

"I should like to read it," I said, as we turned and walked down the damp strip of pavement.

"And to think that you are the wonderful Madame Beaufeet!" he went on. "A light dawns on my benighted soul. It was our friend Lady Ju who set you up?"

"Yes," I said. "I commenced on a more moderate scale. But she was so anxious to find a tenant for these other premises, that we made a conditional agreement."

"I quite understand. Well, I hope it's going to be a success. Certainly you are talked about. That's the best advertisement. And I should have a few good interviews, if I were you. Being on the Press—but here we are! I hope my re-appearance won't startle the keeper of the citadel. Yes—I am the unexpected that happens. Observe—how startled he looks. How fortunate that I met you. You can have no idea of my disappointment."

He chattered on as gaily as ever, as I ushered him into my tiny domicile. I watched his face, expecting surprise or disdain. But, on the contrary, he went into raptures.

I rang for tea, and Barbe Piccotée sent him into fresh ecstasies. Julie happened to have run round to see her father. He did not ask for her. He sat by the fire looking pleased, excited, and extraordinarily animated.

I knew he was consumed with curiosity, but too well-bred to betray it.

I gave him tea, and asked to see the paper containing his notice of the concert. He produced it, and read extracts with a solemnity becoming a Member of Parliament.

They were just like himself. Quaint absurdities that trenched on truth—and yet mocked at it for being true. My laughter never upset his gravity. He continued reading until I asked him what his editor had thought of such criticism.

"He has engaged me permanently at a salary that almost makes me independent of dinners. It appears there are only three humourists in London existence—literary existence. I am the fourth, and destined to eclipse the other three. You had better let me interview you while my halo is still bright. They have an awkward knack of getting dull, you know. The effulgence of genius is short lived, eclipsed by jealousy or indigestion. All geniuses suffer from indigestion. It comes of irregular hours and an absolute ignorance of the divine art of Brillat Savarin. Food may be food, but cooks are an invention of the Devil himself.



A dinner is the type of imperfect pleasure. I have actually been capable of lending a man I detest a five-pound note after dining—well, but unwisely."

"I have no objection to being interviewed," I said. "Only just at present I am a little uncertain as to my arrangements."

"That announcement would send the women trooping to you in their hundreds!"

"But I have only one pair of hands."

"They are very beautiful hands. I have often noticed them. Soft, slender, warm, capable. A woman's hand is so expressive I think, when she permits you to forget it is not a pump-handle."

"Yes—but the interview?" said I, firmly.

"True. Let us to our sheep return. I see you are a woman who performs to-day what she would rather not put off till to-morrow. Let us decide then. To interview or not to interview, as our friend Francis Bacon hath it."

"Not," I said.

"And the reasons?"

"One I have told you; the other—well everybody does it. I should only be one of a crowd."

"My Editor maintains that publicity is the soul of success, and *not* to be advertised is failure. I confess I should like to be the first person to tell why and how you became a Beauty-Specialist. To give sly hints of secrets. To compare the *salle de toilette* to a chamber of mysteries, holy and wonderful as rites of ancient Greece. Greece is such a safe subject for an interview, and *her* rites were assuredly—women's! Yes, look shocked. It's a habit that's growing upon me. All habits do grow, or else run to weed. But you look absolutely stern. Am I to understand——"

"I cannot consent—yet."

"Ah—is there a hitch with the *Dea ex Machina*. Let me arrange it. She can never refuse me anything."

I shook my head. "No. The matter rests entirely between ourselves. No third person could do any good by interference."

"You know, I suppose, that Lady Ju, as we call her, has rather a—a queer reputation. I'm not saying that she isn't a very staunch friend to anyone she likes—but woe betide those she doesn't like. And there are a good few in London Society."

"I have always found her very kind and very generous," I said. "Of course, one hears stories—but I am sure she is a woman who has suffered greatly, and has been wronged greatly."

"I should like to leave my defence in your hands, Madame—what *am* I to call you, by the way."

"De Marsac, of course. The other is only my professional name."

"I rather like it. It trips off the tongue so pleasantly. 'Beaudelet.' Milk and beauty combined. It was an inspiration. Perhaps we don't spell it in the same way. A name is what it sounds—not what it spells. Which reminds me—where is your little companion of the concert? I thought her charming. She expressed unutterable things without saying them."

"What sort of things?"

"Youth—and curiosity; and some sort of experience, as if life had given her hours of cruelty."

"What a psychological description of my secretary and typist."

"Oh! is *that* her combination. But, believe me, those hard young eyes have looked into some seething cauldron of sin or suffering. I am never mistaken in faces."

"I wonder how old you are?" I said, suddenly.

"By my feelings and experiences, forty," he answered. "By actual date of facts connected with interesting events, twenty-five. I'm so glad you asked me. It means going right down to the bed-rock of intimacy, and you are a

woman I have longed to know. There are women for whom a man hungers intellectually; and others who make him conscious of physical cravings. The beginning of love is the destroying of peace. I have never been in love actually. You—but that's not a fair question. A woman only gives that sort of confidence after a ball, when she's combing out her hair before another woman who hasn't so much to comb—or is it, brush?"

"I don't know whether you are the most absurd or the cleverest young man I have ever met!" I said.

"I'm only absurd. I studied the art at college, and it has stood me in good stead. Better than a degree at any rate. It is perfectly possible to impress people with an idea of your cleverness, if you are only very rude, or very truthful. But as yet I am superficial. I do by instinct what other men do by knowledge. They go through the crucible of life and come out fused, and hardened. I only look into the crucible, watch the flames, experiment with the heat. The first time I saw you Madame Beau——de Marsac, I mean, I longed to talk to you. Not superficial, silly talk, but just as now. Confidentially, showing you my real self. The very fact of your listening is a compliment. The expression of your face a delight. So few women can listen expressively. They are dear things, but self-conscious, self-exacting. They never seem able to understand that it is quite as much pleasure to a man to confide as to be confided in. I don't know if that's grammatical, but it has not to face a School Board. You are smiling. Perhaps you think I am talking nonsense. Well! *c'est mon métier*. I fear my accent is deplorable; but one never can learn a foreign language in one's own country, even from a foreigner."

"I certainly think you *are* talking nonsense," I said, in an unexpected pause. "But it is very pleasant nonsense, and I like it."

"How generous you are, and how kind. May I really

rattle on just as I please—about anything and everything?"

"Certainly! if you wish."

"That's just it. I *do* wish, but your patience may be overtaxed, and I don't want to bore you."

"Oh! you won't do *that*," I said.

He passed a beautifully manicured hand over his sleek head. His strange, unyouthful eyes gazed thoughtfully at me from his strangely youthful face.

"Madame de Marsac," he said, abruptly. "I cannot *place* you. I mean—you seem to me a woman fitted for the highest social sphere, and better able to hold your own in it than dozens of women I could name."

"And yet I am only a Beauty doctor, and live in an insignificant flat off Victoria Street!"

"You have spoken."

"It only means a turn in Fortune's wheel. I—like the unfortunate lodging-house ladies one reads of—have known 'better days.'"

"A foregone conclusion."

"Now I am obliged to fight necessity with weapons of its own forging."

"But—this. And for a lady?"

"Ladies keep shops; ladies have to become clerks, typists, dressmakers, gardeners, poultry farmers, servants! Oh! I grant not in your set. They are, happily, envired by circumstances that mean a different sort of life."

"Oh! *their* life!" His tone bespoke contempt. "Sexual delinquencies are what they call life. Perpetual intrigues either for excitement, or gain, or pure devilry. Even girls——"

"No, *please*," I entreated; "I am a little tired of hearing it. The wickedness of the world. The depravity of women, matched or made by the immorality of man. I am so disillusioned that nothing shocks, though a *great deal* disgusts me. And I am no problem; only

a woman who has thought a great deal, and suffered—a little."

"To me you are the most absolutely interesting woman I have ever met. No, don't laugh. I mean it."

"All men mean that sort of thing when they are face to face with the woman who hears it."

"Please don't be cynical. Your eyes look kinder than your lips. Sorrow either sours a woman, or completes her. In any case it enhances her charm. Among the women who come to you——"

"They are of all sets and types; of the *monde où l'on s'amuse*, and the *dernier cri* of Bohemia. Nothing thinskin, wise, or intolerant."

"It must be amusing?"

"Or very sad, if one thinks about them at all."

"Whom do you think about specially?"

"Only Lady Judith Vanderbyl and—the Countess of Ripley."

## XXIX

AFTER Archey Templeton had left, I wondered what had induced me to be so confidential? It was not my usual *métier*. I rather inclined to reserve confidence on my own part in exact ratio as I received it from others. But this boy, despite all his affectations and absurdities, had drawn me out of my shell with unusual success during that hour's visit.

He had London scandals and histories at his fingers' ends. He seemed to take nothing seriously—even himself and his place in the scheme of existence—for even that we had discussed. Yet I felt sure it was all a pose. That he had dropped into it for experiment, and continued it for experience.

I found myself contrasting him with Paul. Paul, to whom "Life is real, Life is earnest," really meant that it *was* something more than a poet's happy phrase. Who played the part of helper, not denouncer, in the odd and curious topsy-turviness of the social *mêlée*. And then I thought of Paul's mother; the woman whom I had called "good,"—and whose goodness unfolded itself with each occasion of our meeting.

There are women who appeal instinctively to women, just as there are others who proclaim "Cat" at the first handshake.

Certainly there was nothing of the cat about Mrs. D'Eyncourt. Velvet-sheathed was every touch of those kind hands, but one felt there were no claws behind them. Sweet, hopeful charity and godliness meant her life, and had been example and teaching to her son. It was wonderful

how these two stood apart from the general "muck of worldliness," which made all of Lady Judith's atmosphere, and had meant a great deal of my own.

I was being gradually drawn out of that atmosphere into one more pure and healthful. It breathed of much my youth had missed and needed. It braced my present lax faculties and sent morbidity flying. With Mrs. D'Eyncourt I was a different woman. A happier, healthier woman. Less distrustful of life's manifold meanings, and less cynically disposed towards its perpetual revelations. But, sweet and soothing as was that influence, it could not hold its own in face of the daily disillusionments my profession brought me. Old women, young women; matured women, vicious women; married or unmarried; ingenious *intrigantes*, or fast *ingénues*, they were all tarred with the same brush; all bent on the conquests and excitements which meant social potentialities.

February and March had brought a certain section of society trooping back to town for Parliamentary and Drawing-room functions. My rooms were besieged by applicants. Still no word came from Lady Judith; and week followed week, uneventful save for Archey Templeton's constant visits, and a serious and annoying outbreak on the part of Julie Thibaud.

It had perplexed me exceedingly, as I had in no way relaxed precautions. Only when remorse and penitence brought her back to my fold, did I extract the truth.

Ada St. Vincent had come across her again. She was popular favourite at some music hall, and Julie had been there to see her in her special "turn." The influence of this wretched girl had, in a measure, undone what I had laboured so strenuously to accomplish in these past months.

I saw there was but one way to combat this influence—that was to forbid the girl to see Julie, either at her father's house, or mine. I insisted upon Julie's giving me the address. I also acquainted Monsieur Thibaud with my opinion and intention.

He was astonished. He could not quite understand why Ada St. Vincent's friendship should affect his daughter's health. But he had unlimited faith in my judgment, and agreed to refuse her admission if she called again.

Armed with such authority, I betook myself to Chelsea—and to the flat where the music-hall "star" was at present installed.

I found her surrounded by all the meretricious upholstery beloved of her kind. I found her also as insolent and audacious as I had expected. But though the battle raged furiously, I held my own. She was vain, narrow-minded, vicious; but at heart she was a coward, and my straight hitting frightened her.

I spared her nothing. I painted the full horrors of the drug-habit, as I had seen and known them. I warned her never to approach Julie Thibaud again.

She burst into weak, pitiful sobbing. She cursed herself and her tempter. She lost all self-control, as I had seen Julie lose it. At one moment she ordered me out of the room; at the next, entreated me to try and cure her, as I had—almost—cured Julie. But that "almost" hardened me. I thought of long, past weeks of effort and worry, and the strain of watching, and then of this wretched creature's return, and her endeavour to undo all that I had effected.

"Cure *you*!" I said. "That's impossible. You are half-way to madness already."

She started up from the couch where she was lying and struck wildly at me. I stepped back, and just evaded the blow.

"Get out of my house!" she raged. "Do you hear? Get out! I hate you! And if I can get hold of your Julie again, I swear she shan't go back to you a second time."

"I shall take care you do not get at Julie again," I said.

"And I shall also inform her father as to what you have *done to his child.*"



Then I left; disgusted with the scene and my own part in it, and with a bitter sense of hopelessness oppressing me. How ridiculous were life and human effort! We heaped up grains of sand and imagined them mountains. Then a little puff of wind came along and scattered the heap. All the labour was wasted; yet still we laboured, and hoped, and believed; journeying on—on—through gold days and grey, to days of nothingness and ultimate annihilation.

I stood by the river. The chill March wind blew across my face; the leafless trees bent and swayed in all their dreary nakedness. I thought of that other night, four months back, when I had stood on its Bridge of Sighs and watched the tide darkly flowing far below. How much had happened in those months; and yet, though life was fuller and of deeper interest, it was no happier for me.

The same bitterness, the same heart-loneliness were mine now as then. Cynicism and negation still made up my theory of existence. The softer and more human influence of Mrs. D'Eyncourt had been withdrawn. She had returned to the country, and I was left to the genial pranks of my profession, the wavering fidelity of Julie Thibaud, and the obstinate silence of Lady Judith Vanderbyl.

Every week the accounts were checked and balanced by Paul. On the first of each month came the cheque representing my salary. But not a word or sign was given by the strange woman whose freak had set me going in so enviable a fashion.

Money poured in. Sums so enormous that I stood aghast. It was not the treatments that brought it in, but the hundred-and-one developments arising from them. My fame and my name were specially famous among a class to whom money meant nothing in comparison with beauty or adornment.

I had perfected myself in electric massage, and found it extraordinarily beneficial for nervous or neurotic patients. But I knew perfectly well that the real secret of my success

lay in my own strong magnetism. I seemed to have an extraordinary power over these women. They came again and again. They were simply slaves to my directions. If I told them they looked beautiful, they believed it. If I suggested any absurdity, they followed it. If I professed inability to perform miracles, they humbly begged me to do "anything I could." The "anything" meaning, of course, a semi-theatrical make-up, whose effects were pleasing, but transient.

A colder blast of wind than usual suddenly stirred my faculties to an appreciation of discomfort. I left the side of the Embankment and hurried on towards home.

A step echoed behind me, quickened, and was at my side. A hand touched my arm. "Madame," said a humble voice, "I—I thought you might walk home, so I came to meet you. I saw you standing there by the river. I did not like to disturb you."

"Why, Julie!" I exclaimed, and drew the trembling hand within my arm. "I am glad of your company. I intended to walk."

"Was she—Ada, very rude, madame? I know what she is; what she can be. I was full of shame when I thought to what I might have subjected you."

"She *was* very rude; most insulting. But I think I had the best of it. I told her she was never to come to see you again, at my house, or your father's. You must promise me that you will refuse to admit her."

"I—I wonder you can trust me, madame," said the girl, humbly.

"I shall not trust you a third time. Not if you break faith with me again. But let us change the subject, I don't want to talk of it."

"Nor I," she said—with a shiver. "I forgot to tell you, madame, that Mr. Templeton called just after you had left. He seemed disappointed. He said he had some *important* news. He asked me if you would be in to dinner.

I said yes. And then he said he would be daring enough to call in later."

"I wonder if it is anything of importance—or his usual nonsense."

"He looked quite serious."

I said no more. We turned into a side street, and were faced by a large building brilliantly lit outside, and covered with posters, announcing what I imagined to be an entertainment.

Quite indifferently, I read the name. Julie read it also. I heard her hurried exclamation, "Why, that is the wonderful Monk who preaches so beautifully. They say no one has ever done so much good, or been so persecuted."

"The two generally mean the same thing," I said.

"Oh! Madame—if you would—if we might just go in and hear him."

"Well—why not?" I said. "We are rather early. Also, we have had no dinner. But that's a detail. I confess I too, am curious. I have read a great deal about this English monk. I should like to hear his preaching. There are legends of conversions such as eclipse Savanarola; of women flinging their jewels and purses at his feet, and asking only to serve the Christ he preaches. Monkhoo and the English Church are rather contradictory terms. I am not sure that this man hasn't been excommunicated by Orthodoxy. But we will hear him, Julie, and form our own opinion."

We stood there in a small but steadily-increasing crowd until the doors opened; then took tickets from a sweet-faced, but business-like sister—also of Anglican persuasion. We were shown to our seats. They were in the second row, and faced a bald, bare platform, on which stood a table, a chair, and an American organ. There was no sign of monkhood or priesthood about these primitive accessories. They would have suited a mechanic's institute, a Baptist meeting, or a Salvation Army service equally well.

## Queer Lady Judas

The hall began to fill rapidly. The audience were of a class new to me, and correspondingly interesting. Some of them were enthusiasts. Some had come out of mere curiosity. Some were faithful followers. Some bigoted opponents. And to face them all in their various moods and opinions came one simple, frail old man, clad in the habit of a Benedictine Father, and holding in his hand the Book of Peace and War.

I sat there and gazed at that wonderful face, with its halo of silvered hair, its rapt and saintly expression. I don't know what I had expected. I don't know whether I was amused or startled by the voice that called upon us all to sing in praise and glory of one name. The Name this faithful disciple had set up as a standard and pattern of life. His life, and those who called themselves his followers.

*"Jesus only!"*

That was all. Text of doctrine—text of life. Text of joy to come, and trouble conquered, and sin forgiven. Like one in a dream, I sat there, listening to the fervid eloquence of one who *believed* in what he preached. And, more than that, who practised it. Like a second Paul of Tarsus he had known every sort of persecution, of hardship, of bodily pain, of spiritual conflict. Like the great Apostle he had triumphed and failed, and fought and won, and lost and yet conquered. And there he stood—triumphant. A cross on his breast, a rosary at his waist; but on his brow the seal of joy imperishable, and on his lips the smile of that Peace that passeth understanding! Of sect or order one took no heed. Of all the thousand and one differentiations over which God's priesthood have fought "like beasts of Ephesus," none seemed of any account, set against that holy enthusiasm.

*"Jesus only."*

Jesus—the babe at his mother's breast. Jesus—walking amidst the snares and pitfalls of a scoffing world. Jesus—Lord of a faithful few. Jesus—Example and Master and Saviour, all in one.

*"Jesus only."*

The girl by my side was sobbing as she knelt. Sighs, and streaming eyes, and rapt faces were all around me. And I—

It seemed to me as if some hand, gentle and soft as a little child's, touched my breast. I closed my eyes and the pressure of the hand sank deeper. The walls of flesh parted; and my bare heart, cold and hard with garnered years of infidelity, suddenly throbbed into warm palpitating life. I could not tell what had happened, or why my stubborn knees should bend beneath me. I could not tell why suddenly all earthly bonds were loosed, and I seemed set free and floating on a sea of light and glory. I could not tell where I went—or what I saw—or why the whole mystery and wonder of life seemed suddenly simple as a little child's prayer.

Did I live a moment, an hour, a year in that strange trance? I could not tell.

The pressure of the hand relaxed. The rapture faded. The splendour passed into nothingness. I lifted my wet eyes to where that solitary figure stood. The only thing I saw was—a Cross.

He came down and passed among us, and was gone. Like one in a dream I rose and walked out, conscious that I must speak to him again. Must *know* with certainty whether this was truth, or mere sensational proselytising. Tricks of eloquence that carried reason away on silver wings of fancy.

I forgot Julie—I forgot everything. I saw that frail figure before me, and followed it.

"May I speak to you?" I said.

He paused, and searched my face with keen and kindly eyes.

"I am very tired," he said, "and I need rest. Yet I am on my Master's business, and refuse no troubled enquirer. You are troubled?"

"Yes," I said.

"Come with me, then. I will hear you."

Still as one in a dream I walked beside him and some attendant brother, and found myself at last in a quiet, ordinary room.

"We lodge here," he said. "It is convenient for the Mission Hall. And now tell me your trouble. Speak freely."

But I could find no words. The mystic hand no longer touched me. My heart was once more cold.

He waited patiently on my silence.

"Shall we pray," he said, softly. "That may help you?"

Then I found voice. "I do not believe in prayer," I said.

He smiled, that sweet and radiant smile. His eyes glanced from my face to my fashionable clothes; to the sable muff, with its hanging laces and scented violets.

He took it from me quietly. "Put your hands in mine," he said, "and let me talk to you. Talk is prayer sometimes. . . So you do not believe in God? Well, that is no new thing for me to hear. You have an air of wordliness—fashionable worldliness. The men and women of the world are mostly unbelievers. They live for this life only. They cannot even picture another, where motoring, and dining, and card-playing, and illicit love-making have no place."

"You describe the sins of society!" I said, surprised. "What can you know of it or them? It shows you but a closed door."

He released my hands gently, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit there," he said, and took another for himself. "You ask what I know of society. Do you suppose my Monastery door shuts *out*, as well as shuts *in*? Would to God it did! But I have to watch as well as pray, my child. I read—I hear; I see—I note—and I judge——"

"So do I," I said.

"What have you read?" he asked.

"Everything! Voltaire, Rousseau, Renan, Daudet, Zola, Tolstoi, Kant, Maupassant, Spencer, Darwin."

He held up an entreating hand. "Poor child," he said. "I don't wonder you are befogged and bewildered. It needs a very strong brain to weigh such conflicting evidences and give truth its due."

"I have lived in France," I went on. "That country of barbarous bigotry, and enlightened atheism. The consequence is—my presence here to-night. I heard you preach. I—I don't know how to express its effect. This may be mere hysteria—I can't tell. I have nothing to guide me. I only felt if I could see you face to face—if I could hear you say you *believe* what you told us— Can you prove it?"

"I have only my life to prove it," he answered. "And that life is an open page for all the world to read."

"Stress, danger, temptation—these things don't penetrate the doors of your retreat."

"Ah! Do they *not*? That is where the world misjudges. Into every retreat, into the Church itself, man takes his sinful heart, even with his repentant body. Sin is conceived within us—not performed first and realized afterwards."

"But God—Christ—religion, are they *true*? How do you know? How can you tell?"

"By faith, and by the love I have of Him who gave Himself for me!"

I was silent.

"You have never realized that yet?"

"No," I said. "It is all darkness and hopelessness. Until to-night I had almost thought it—Peace."

"A false peace," he said. "Give me your sorrow. Let me help you. God sent you to that room to-night. He does not mean that you should go from there un comforted."

I recalled the scene and the place from whence I had come to that room. The contrast made me shudder. I felt bewildered—expectant; and yet strangely sad. Was this life, and the other side but delusion? Or was this

delusion, and life the reality? The mystery that envelopes all change of feeling hung like a misty curtain between my soul and my desire to speak its longings. With the sense of spiritual extinction came a sense of my surroundings. It seemed incredible that I—the woman I knew—should have passed through such a phase of violent emotion; should be trembling and quivering like a culprit before a judge. Should be struggling with fetters that chained her into darkness, even as she strained towards light.

A wave of evasive doubt rolled back over my soul. Had I not vowed that religious fraud should never claim my acceptance? Had I not seen it again and again, decked with saintly aureole, and yet a mere sinner of good intentions—like many and many a sinner of less pretention.

The harmony was spoilt. The colours grew blurred once again. Existence became its old, ugly, harsh self. I had been ushered too swiftly into the spiritual secrets of another world. I had lost my footing, and been swept to and fro on rushing currents of emotion. Now the clamour ceased suddenly. I felt only frozen, calm, still. I looked at the Monk. His face was rapt. His lips moved in prayer. Suddenly he opened his eyes and looked at me. We seemed to stand in a great silence. He and I alone. I beseeching comfort, and he longing to give it. But I knew it was not in his power. Not in the power of any living being.

The old, cold numbness clutched me again. I bent my head with the reverence he inspired, and he laid his hand upon it.

“You cannot pray—yet?”

“No,” I said, reluctantly.

“It must be as God chooses. You are in His hands, my child. At the appointed hour the Light will show itself to you as it has done to me—to countless others.”

“May I come again, Father?” I said, faintly.



"Of course, you may. But I grieve to say I shall not be here for a long time. This was my last service."

"May I write? May I try to tell you what I can't say to-night?"

"Certainly. I am returning to the Abbey—you know it?"

"Who does not—and its wonderful history."

He smiled, as a father smiles at praise of a beloved child.

"It has a wonderful history. It is a record of the triumphs of Faith. I am going there for a much-needed rest. The world tires and saddens me as once it had no power to do. I love the solitudes and the peace; though it has not been my Master's will to apportion them to me for long continuance."

I gave him my hand. "God bless and help you, my child," he said.

And then I found myself once more in the quiet street, where the patient figure of Julie awaited me.

### XXX

THERE are few things so crushing and disheartening as the fall from some fancied spiritual height to the ordinary dead level of existence.

As I walked by Julie Thibaud's side, as I felt the gentle pressure of her hand on my arm, all the fervid and tempestuous passions of that service and conversation seemed to die into normal quietude.

I was once more the doubter—the investigator. Not the emotional woman, carried on a tide of enthusiasm to the shores of a fancied salvation. But I encouraged Julie to talk of her experience, which she did freely. All the more because she was convinced that the Monk was of her faith. Else why the dress, the cross, the rosary?

I must confess these details had not appealed to me very forcibly.

Dress, or habit of some sort, was the world's insignia of order. All professions seemed to me more or less ludicrously garbed; whether they represented the wigged hideousness of the law, the uncomfortable ostentation of uniform, the frock coat and tall hat, inseparable from the etiquette of medicine, or the black gown and bands that made the plain "minister" so unimportant beside the ecclesiastical trappings of Higher Church dignitaries.

All these things were representative. So was Court dress. But behind them all lurked still the pitiful human thing, liable to all the pains, and trials, and dangers of life. Knowing its own limitations and deformities; slave of vice, and prerogatives, and superstition.

Julie's babble was the pretty moving pathos of an erring child; sorry and repentant, and mildly hopeful of escaping punishment. It did not move me. Had her confession and its attendant penance been effectual in preventing this recent lapse of her's, I might have felt more faith in her protestations. As it was, I could only command my soul in patience, and wait on events.

We had both been so pre-occupied, that when we entered my flat and were faced by a mournful and reproachful Barbe—a Barbe proclaiming that a "so charming dinner" was quite spoilt, and that an impatient "Monsieur" had awaited me for at least one hour, I was too surprised to explain anything.

"Patience never deserved a loftier monument than I do," was Archey Templeton's greeting. "I suppose you have an explanation for your faithful *bonne*. Or is she a *concierge*? I never can remember any French definition of the genus domestic except those two. She assures me you promised to come home to dinner; the dinner was prepared, ready, with the punctuality so to be commended, and yet you came not. But—pray, pardon my nonsense, Madame Beaufilet—you look pale and tired. I am afraid——"

"It's the effect of fasting and prayer," I said, flippantly; and then could have bitten my tongue out with rage at its flippancy.

"*Could you not watch with me one hour?*" rang its sorrowful reproach in my memory. It had been the keynote of that wonderful sermon.

"But is it Lent? I thought you——"

"Oh, never mind!" I exclaimed, petulantly. "What is the important communication?"

Julie had left the room. I threw off my thick coat, and sat down by the fire.

"I wish you'd have something to eat first, or a glass of wine."

"Are you going to tell me anything very shocking?"

"Well, you know how I hear things—really sometimes without taking any trouble."

"Yes—yes," I said, impatiently.

"Well, this afternoon I ran straight into the arms of a man I know—a friend of the family. Celebrated surgeon. We exchanged a few words, and then he told me he was going down into the country to-night, to perform a very serious operation. 'I think you know the lady,' he said. For that matter everyone knows her. 'Not Lady Ripley?' I asked. 'No. But almost as famous. Lady Judith Vanderbyl!'"

I sprang from my chair in sheer astonishment.

"An operation?"

"His very words. I wondered if she had told you?"

"I haven't heard a word from her, or——"

"Or D'Eyncourt? I called at Eaton Square to ask."

"Did you see him?"

"Oh yes. He was immersed in business as usual. He was awfully shocked. I told him I was to see you at nine o'clock, or I fancy he would have come here."

I stood with one hand on the chimney-piece, trying to steady my startled faculties. It seemed so strange, so impossible to associate Lady Judith with such news. Yet I remembered she had been ailing before that momentous interview; and I recalled again its tragic effects, and how ill she had looked when I last saw her.

"Oh, why didn't she tell me!" I exclaimed. "I would have gone to her at once—anywhere!"

His usually impassive face took on a quite natural and youthful expression.

"I always thought you were genuine," he said. "Now I am sure of it. Do you know I came here hoping you would say that. I don't believe another woman in London, who knows her, would have said it."

But I had taken up a time-table, and was hastily turning *over the leaves*.

"Dorset is the county I know. But what's the address?"

"Prayle is the nearest station. It's only a little fishing port."

"But the name of her house or place."

He took out a pocket-book and turned over the leaves. "Manor Heath, near Brightsea. You can't get a train to-night."

"One leaves Waterloo at five-fifty in the morning. I could easily catch that. I would be at Prayle at nine o'clock. I wonder what time the——"

The sharp "ting" of the outer bell startled me. It was repeated twice. "That means a telegram," I exclaimed.

Barbe Piccotée entered on my words. "The boy, he waits. He desires to know if madame sends a reply, though it cannot depart till the morning of to-morrow."

I was reading the message eagerly.

"Come to me first train urgent.—Judith Vanderbyl."

I wrote: "Yes; of course," on the prepaid form, and gave it to Barbe.

Then I turned to Archey. "She has remembered me, you see. Oh! I am so glad."

"What an extraordinary woman you are! You look as radiant as if you had received some good news, instead of a summons to all the horrors of a sick-room, and a woman whose temper——"

"Don't," I said. "Who is without fault? None of us."

"I really believe," he said, "that ninety-nine women are created to make the hundredth an exception to every rule they've taught, or we've learnt."

And with that enigmatical remark he took his departure.

I summoned Julie, and then Barbe Piccotée brought in some food. I explained my hurried departure to the girl.

"I may be away only a day, or, perhaps two. Julie, can I trust you?"

She flushed to her temples. "Before God, madame, and

as I value my soul's salvation, I swear it shall not occur again."

"Promise you will refuse to see that girl if she should call?"

"Indeed—indeed, I will not see her again!"

"You must go to Hanover Square," I went on, "and explain to Miss Audrey, and the other assistants. You will have to interview callers, and put off my appointments. You can say I am summoned to the sick bed of a friend. If they must have treatment, send them to Madame Vera, Bond Street."

She promised faithful attention. I thought that the sense of responsibility might have beneficial effects. With all my heart I hoped it. I did not like to leave the girl at such a crisis, but on the other hand I could not turn a deaf ear to Lady Judith's entreaty. Julie was very humble and very penitent. The effects of the monk's eloquence were still dominating her. She was passionately desirous to atone for her fault. I pointed out her opportunity. Then I packed the few things I should need and we went to bed. I slept badly, for I was wondering what really was the nature of Lady Judith's illness. How she would face the ordeal, and what might be its results. She was a woman who hated bodily suffering, and I had often heard her boast of exemption. But here was another instance of Fate's cruelty. Another victim of the Inexorable Wheel.

I thought of her to-night, facing the long, lonely darkness; listening perhaps to the striking hours as they passed into the void of "never more." Knowing that each hour brought nearer the dreaded ordeal. Facing life with a new shadow on the threshold of its tragic "to-morrow."

I had witnessed so many tragedies of this sort. Seen so much patient waiting on the dread uncertainty of the surgeon's skill. So much quiet despair facing a last hope, or its denial. This strange woman had been marked down for such an ordeal. How was she bearing it? From what *source* did she draw courage?

There flashed back to my memory a face of glorified faith ; the wonderful soul-stirring words of that strange enthusiast. Oh ! for faith such as his ! For hope as certain ; for happiness as assured !

In an hour like this, when I faced in imagination what another doubter faced in grim reality, I felt that earth, and the things of earth, and its vanities and follies were, indeed, of no more account than the breath on a mirror ; the dust of the highway. And yet for them, and sake of them, men and women staked their soul's salvation.

For we *had* souls, and they were not destined to perish as the body perished. I had learnt that to-day. I believed it to-night.

"I wish I could have spoken. I wish I could have prayed !" I thought, wearily, as I recalled that patient face and gentle entreaty. "And yet how wise he was not to force me into insincerity. How wise to leave the soil, untilled and broken as it was, to the tender craft of Nature. If ever——"

But there I paused again. It was the old dead-lock. The old, chill doubt. Life. Death. The Beyond.

And yet, dominating all, the foolish idiocies and pettiness of man's earthly kingdom. The shadows worshipping straws ; the fools with their baubles ; the puppets, prancing and grimacing on their strings.

What wonder that men, such as this Christian monk, fled, with horror and disgust, from the clamouring forces that beset and despoiled their higher nature ! What wonder that every joy and tempting of earth looked but as a child's toy to the eyes that had pierced eternity !

With my own mind obsessed by that word, and all its fathomless meaning, I lost myself in mists of unconsciousness.

## XXXI

THE country of England !

The fields, the cottages, the slopes of green hills, the dim and furrowed stretches of valley and meadow answering the call of Spring. How long since I had seen such things ! How beautiful and friendly they looked, as my eager eyes claimed renewed acquaintance.

As the hours sped, the scene changed. Heath and moorland chased each other into safe shelter of plantations. Fir and pine stood darkly green against a brightening sky. Water flashed into sight ; oval pools, silvery meres, where wild duck hovered or dived ; vast stretches of bog, hollowed and trenched. Then a far-off glint of sea, grey-blue against a bluer sky, and always those serried rows of pine and fir, standing sentinels of the landscape.

Once again, the sea. White cliffs, muffled in thick herbage, topped by March verdure ; wandering sheep and petulant, insistent lambs. Quaint villages, church spire or tower their ever-constant landmark. So on and on, until at last, unintelligible porters clamoured a name which the station boards confirmed as my destination.

I alighted, and gave my bag to a mouldy individual whose uniform bespoke indifference on the part of the railway company.

"Is there a carriage or conveyance to meet me—from Manor Heath ?" I asked.

"I b'lieve there be," he said. "Grand doin's theerabouts seemin'ly ; folks has been comin' and goin' these days past,



though not at such a untimely hour as be this. Bee'st there any more luggage, Miss?"

"No," I said.

"Ay—there's a groom feller lookin' for 'ee," he continued, nodding towards a liveried figure at the end of the platform. "Pr'aps he knaws thee by name? Dang the fool! Do 'ee see how persistin' he watches the quality end o' the train. Them butter-heads b'aint no manner o' use, save givin' work to better men than theyselves."

By this time I was near enough the "groom-feller" to ask if he was from Manor Heath. Finding such to be the case I gave my loquacious friend a shilling, at which he stared as if incredulous; then I hurried into the waiting dog-cart.

"How is your mistress?" I asked the groom, as he tucked a rug round my feet.

"Very bad, I hear, ma'am," he said, touching a respectful forelock. "There are two nurses with her, and two London doctors, and the doctor from here as well."

I asked no more questions. We drove through a long, narrow street, with quaint houses and many varieties of shops. It was full of twists and turnings, that branched from either side to a crowded quay, of which I caught chance glimpses.

A certain stir and bustle, and a procession of carts and country folk, proclaimed "market day." The sun was shining brilliantly, as it had never seemed to shine in London all these past dreary months. The air bore the salt of the sea on its breath.

We soon left the town and its straggling outskirts behind, and were facing the open country. Wonderfully green and fresh it looked to my tired London eyes. Delicious was the scent of field and meadow and budding hedges, after years of towns.

But it was the green of the trees that surprised me. That strange lustreless green of pinewoods, constant through

every season. They seemed to be everywhere. They bordered the road above the hedgerows. They crowned the hills; they stood among their kindred firs, and threw protecting arms across vast clumps of laurel and rhododendrons. We turned from the road into an avenue of the same trees, with here and there a yew or oak for contrast. All around was a wilderness of wild brushwood, of evergreens and arbutus. It seemed quite uncultured and left to Nature's own sweet will. Save for the ascending road, the drive was merely a space of moorland, around which crowded heather and bracken.

It was a surprise to me when a white gate barred the way. The man sprang down and opened it, and again we drove on through more lovely wilderness of tree and shrub, until finally a cultivated curve of garden came to view, beneath a wide stone terrace.

Then I saw the house. A low, white, rambling house with a stone porch. Ivy crept and clambered round the leaded casements, and had made the chimneys into miniature towers. I was not learned enough in architectural problems to guess at "period," or style. But I thought it eminently picturesque.

The door was opened, almost as the dog-cart stopped, by an elderly, anxious man, who represented the butler I had seen in town. I hurried in, and found myself in a wide, square hall, where a glorious wood fire blazed and glowed on old oak, and paintings, and storied treasures, such as suit old country mansions, and look so woefully out of place in the mere "house" of London.

"You know me. I am Madame de Marsac," I said to the respectful servitor. "When can I see Lady Judith?"

"Her ladyship has been asking constantly for you, madam," he answered. "But I was to offer you breakfast on your arrival. It's quite ready if——"

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I would rather

see your mistress at once. Can you tell me at what hour the—the operation is to take place?”

“I don’t know, madam. But the doctors are all here.”

The cold, sick feeling I had never quite been able to master on such occasions crept over me. I saw a white reflection of my face in a mirror above the oak mantel-shelf.

“If you have some tea ready, I think I will take a cup,” I said, hurriedly. “But nothing to eat.”

He bowed respectfully, and I sat down by the fire trying to compose myself. The rustle of a dress roused me. I looked up, and saw a nurse coming down the shallow, thickly-carpeted stairs.

“Madame de Marsac?” she questioned.

“Yes,” I said. Lady Judith sent for me last night. How is she?”

The woman gave me a keen, quick glance. “Her ladyship is a very trying patient. We hardly know how to take her. Even now I am not sure that she won’t send the surgeon back to London. Sir Christopher Reeves—you know. He arrived last night with his assistant. Lady Judith would not fix the hour until she had seen you.”

The butler brought in the tea at this moment. I drank it thirstily.

“Now,” I said, “please take me to her.”

“If you have not seen her ladyship for some time please don’t *seem* shocked,” said the nurse, as I followed her upstairs. “She looks quite awful. She seems to know it, for she has had all the mirrors taken out of her room.”

I nodded. “I know something about sick rooms and sick people,” I said. “I have had hospital training myself.”

She gave me another surprised glance, and then led me across a Turkey-carpeted corridor and opened a door. I saw a large, dim room—a large, old-fashioned bed, hung with heavy curtains of crimson damask. A blazing wood fire threw cheerful reflections across massive mahogany. Another nurse was sitting in a low chair by the bed.

Softly I crossed the room. I stood beside a quiet figure resting amidst great pillows. I saw once more those strange gleaming eyes. But now they were deeply sunken into a face shrivelled, and yellow, and haggard. A face drawn and aged by cruel pain.

I took the burning, shrivelled hand that lay on the white quilt. "I have come to you, dear Lady Judith," I said, softly.

Suddenly I saw her lips quiver. Two great tears stole into the hard, bright eyes.

"My dear," she said, brokenly, "I don't deserve it. But I thought you would."

"Why, of course," I said, cheerfully. "I only wish I had known——"

She pressed my hand sharply. "Shall I go through with it. I haven't made up my mind. I said if you thought it advisable——"

"But I know nothing about your illness," I said. "Would you like me to speak to the doctors?"

"Yes. You possess some common sense, and you're not afraid of the truth. If the—the thing is to be useless I won't go through with it. I'd rather wait on death as I am—with my senses about me. But if there's hope—a chance——"

She turned her head away. That poor, natural head, with its scant grey hairs twisted into a small hard knob. Alas! Alas! for vanity, when sickness and death claim attention.

"I will go to Sir Christopher at once," I said.

"And come and tell me—the truth."

I pressed her hand again. I had no words. The calm, composed faces of the watchful nurses were a mandate of caution.

When I stood face to face with the great surgeon, and heard of the nature of the operation—its cause, and risk—I was confronted by an imperative duty. I knew the truth of what he said, after diagnosing the case. He had paid

previous visit, and then advised what now meant the only chance for life. Lady Judith's own medical man—a country practitioner, nervous and irresponsible—had summoned him hastily. Everything was prepared in the adjoining room. His assistant would administer the anæsthetic. They only waited on this sudden irresolution on the part of the patient.

Sir Christopher paced the room restlessly. "I must return by the afternoon train," he said. "I have other cases as imperative. I have sent my best nurse down to attend to Lady Judith. I entreat of you, Madame de Marsac, to use your influence. Delay is sheer madness."

So I went sadly back to that sick bed, and spoke the truth.

She was silent for some moments. Then she turned her dreary face of suffering to mine.

"Well, I never was a coward. If you think it best, I will go through with it. The sooner the better. Only—" her hand clutched mine with a sort of desperation—"promise me that you will stand by me; that you will hold my hand when they put that horrible cap over my face. (Yes—I know.) That you will hold my hand till the last moment of consciousness. After that——"

The pause was horrible and ominous. I felt myself shiver. A tremor went over her own face. She closed her eyes.

"These are the sort of occasions when good folks see a clergyman, and have prayers offered for a safe recovery. I'd do even *that* if I thought I should see my boy. . . . But it was a clergyman who told me that all suicides went to hell. A clergyman who refused him Christian burial. Well, if he is in hell, I would rather go down to its depths to see him once again, than wake in Heaven to his eternal absence. No tortures of any devil could be worse than those my life has known!"

Her voice broke into that dry sob, so piteous and so harsh, that I had heard in the Eaton Square room. I

seemed to see again that awful face, clamouring for vengeance on her dead boy's murderer!

These were not the thoughts and feelings with which to face the ordeal before her; with which to consecrate life's last conscious moments. Yet, what could I say—or do? I thought even Julie would have been a better ministrant of consolation, than I, the cold fatalist, to whom death meant the inevitable, and the grave—annihilation.

A nurse approached. "Your ladyship must not excite yourself. You must keep calm."

"I'll try."

She closed her eyes for a moment. Then she opened them. She looked first at me, then at the nurse, then round the room, as if taking farewell of familiar and endeared things. Finally they rested on a door; the door dividing this room from one of preparation. An odd, bitter smile curved her colourless lips. "In there—I know. I heard them bring in the table. Pity one can't die decently in one's bed, nowadays."

Her hand clutched my arm. "You will help me in. I'll walk. I won't be carried."

"Yes," I said.

"And remember your promise to hold my hand to the last moment of consciousness?"

"Yes," I said, huskily, once again.

"Very well! Call in the butchers! Ring down the curtain on the last act of my queer life!"

## XXXII

For long I was haunted by that horrible scene. The sheeted table; the three waiting men; the two gravely important nurses; and that strange figure, standing by my side with smiling lips, and a hand that put my trembling arm to shame.

I kept my word. I stood there and held her hand, and saw the leather cap placed over her face, and heard the deep slow breathing that meant inhalation, and then—— A nurse took me away to merciful silence and distance, where neither shriek nor groan could penetrate.

I waited on all that night. Neither of the nurses left her, or seemed to think of sleep. She lay drugged, passive, unconscious, save for some deep sigh or pitiful moan. But the grey dawn found her among the living; and it was on my face that her dazed eyes looked, when once again life clamoured at the portals of consciousness. She was too feeble to speak, but I felt that she was glad to have me still beside her. I had seen that look of wonder and relief in other eyes; at other beds of suffering.

The post brought me anxious letters from Julie, from Paul D'Eyncourt, from Archéy Templeton. It seemed strange to sit in this silent room and think of the world without. The world going on just the same as it had ever gone—as it must ever go.

I was too wearied and exhausted to write answers. I sent telegrams, framed hopefully. As yet one could only wait on results. The nurses were cheerful in prognostication. The patient was strong and full of courage, always a

good sign. But for days, and weeks, there was no prophesying whether she would rally or sink under the terrible strain of recuperation. In those days and weeks I was constantly to and fro. I would go up to town for special appointments, and then return to Lady Judith. The contrast between the frivolous chatter and senseless demands of fashionable vanity, and the solemn quiet and suspense of that sick-room, were contrasts that painted life's ironies with bitter mockery. Contrasts that set me thinking, pondering, wondering.

All the brilliant pageant of life, in which this strange woman had taken part, went on just the same. And she seemed unconscious of its very existence. As I watched her lying silent and still in that great bed, I often wondered where her thoughts had fled—in what realm of the past or present that strange mind was working out its strange imaginings. Did she think of that world which had so quickly forgotten her? Of the women she had ruined; of the one woman she had failed to ruin? Of the dolls of fashion she had dressed; of the "smart" beauties she had despised, and the vain ones she had encouraged in vanity?

Through the long days and the long nights she lay stoically there. Seldom speaking or complaining; bearing the wearisome ordeals of the sick room with exemplary fortitude. Asking no question as to the success of the operation; simply existing and enduring.

Each time I saw her, I saw a greater change. The skin was yellower and more parchment-like; the piercing eyes less keen and more deeply sunken: the once stout, unwieldy frame more wasted. She was kept constantly under the influence of opiates; partly to kill pain, and partly to bring sleep.

She always looked pleased when I came into the room. Sometimes she made an effort to talk in the old amusing, cynical way; but, I could see it was an effort, and one



which soon exhausted her. She asked constantly after Paul D'Eyncourt, but would not see him or his mother.

The great surgeon came down again, and expressed satisfaction with his own handiwork. Of course, there was prostration, weakness; that was to be expected. But, considering the patient's age and constitution, and the critical nature of the operation, everything had gone marvellously well; marvellously.

I did not agree with him, but naturally kept my opinion to myself.

Meantime the gay world was trooping back from winter resorts and country houses, and hunting counties, to take up the cares of the season once again. The opera was advertised; the lady journalist was to the fore in all Society papers, with anxiously looked-for items respecting the Mrs. "Dickeys," and Mrs. "Jackeys," and Mrs. "Willies," who looked "so smart" or "so well" in the Park; or wore their "renowned" pearls and their "celebrated" emeralds at Society functions.

Bond Street was crowded, and Piccadilly a block. Women's eyes turned fondly to the shop windows; and lace, and silk, and floating feathers made the streets like an animated poultry yard. Everyone said that dress had never been so charming; and *décolleté* throats and shoulders gave spasms of delight to wandering foreigners, and newly arrived Colonials. Accomplished courtesans cast envious glances at their smart sisterhood, and complained they were not "playing the game." For as far as dress and "make up" went, the one was the counterpart of the other.

All my old friends had flocked back to me. Lady Ormaroyd, Mrs. Dickey Johnson—as lovely as ever—Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley, and her French friend, having lost "pots" at Monte Carlo, and seemingly none the worse off for the loss.

My time was fully occupied. I often had difficulty in arranging hours and days. And all these women had

one general topic of conversation—the marvellous rejuvenation of Lady Ripley.

What *had* she done? What could she have done? Why, she had the skin and complexion of a young girl! She was a miracle—a marvel—the loveliest woman in London! Did I know the secret?

I confessed that I guessed it.

Wouldn't I tell them? Would I do it for them?

My "no" was inexorable. "In six years from now," I said, "the Countess Ripley will regret her rashness. But it will be too late." And more I would not say.

I never caught sight of that famous lady herself, nor did she call on me. Neither had I any idea how she had staved off financial ruin. I saw her name constantly in Society papers, but I noted that the said name was invariably absent from any great Court function, or any specially notable entertainment. Neither was it ever united with that of her husband, though other names shadowed it with a quite remarkable constancy.

I told none of these things to Lady Judith; but I discoursed of them with Archey Templeton on occasions, and agreed with him as to "sailing near the wind," and the art of trimming one's sails according to one's skipper!

Still, it was only an old story repeated. The story of seasons that had been, and of seasons still to be. The story of long-recognized custom and its seal of—condonance. The story of mindless bodies and soulless minds. The story of women.

How weary I grew of it and of them. The "Eternal Feminine," in its eternal guise of excited frivolity.

Old women; young women; ageless women who were grandmothers, and looked grand-daughters under rose lights, and under certain conditions! Women with strange faces and tired eyes; women with young heads and old bodies. Women with strange-coloured cheeks that art had *destroyed*, and which defied art's counterfeits. Women

who looked thirty-six in hats and "transformations," and sixty without them! Smiling women; chattering women; silly women; exuberant women; enervated women; but all false, all artificial; all the product and the martyrs of a false persuasive code that defied the laws of sense and reason, and proclaimed the day's sufficiency as sufficient!

I was weary of my life and of them. I half repented of a whim that was training Julie Thibaud to follow in my steps, and learn my methods. But as the teaching and the exercise seemed to have completed the cure I had rashly undertaken, I adopted the philosophy that traces good as a product of evil.

My life was so busy and so fully occupied that I had little time for thought. I eagerly welcomed the close of the week, when the train bore me out of London heat and London crowds down to that lovely wilderness of woods I had grown to love so well.

It was the middle of July before Lady Judith was able to leave her room. She was placed in a wheeled chair and taken downstairs, and so on to the terrace.

I used to find her there under the gay, striped awning, with all the glories of the garden spread before her, and all the green depths of those great woods which made the beauty of Manor Heath, behind.

We would have tea together on the terrace, and I would tell her of her friends and acquaintances. But though she was once more eager and interested in their doings, she never expressed a wish to see any of them. I told her of Mrs. D'Eyncourt's desires, but she was inexorable.

"I don't want them. I don't care if I never see them again. I only want—you."

It was flattering, but it was also singular. I often wondered how all her business matters got on. Paul D'Eyncourt certainly had his hands full. I asked if she would not let him come down for a personal interview.

"No," she said. "You can take him my instructions. I wrote to my man of business about my affairs before the operation. They are pretty straight, I think; the affairs—not the lawyers. They're more or less a bad lot. I've given up Judas et Cie. It has worked up to a tremendous concern, and has been taken over *sub-rosa* by an enterprising young peeress. She expects to make a million or two out of her friends. I hope she may! With regard to other matters"—she paused and looked thoughtfully at me—"I should like to know if you are very keen on that business of—ours? You look awfully fagged and worried at the week-ends."

"I feel it," I said. "But you were anxious it should be a success, and so it is."

She nodded once or twice. "A success—yes. But there are other employments less wearying and less unpleasant."

"Are you suggesting I should give up the Hanover Square business? If so, what am I to do? You knew my position when I undertook it."

"Yes. I wonder——"

Her head sank on her breast as it often did when she lapsed into thought. There was a long silence; I, too, wondered what would have happened if she had not come to see me on that eventful night. If I had remained in the comparative obscurity of my flat, instead of flashing forth on the world of shams as a new beacon for its frivolous craft. Those pretty fragile toys, sailing at their own sweet will and heedless of storm or shipwreck.

Counted by time, my experience had been short-lived; but counted by revelations, it seemed to me years since I had sent my advertisements forth as sprats to catch what fish they might. Years since I had stood on the bridge in that chill November sunset, and looked hopelessly over a great city that knew nothing of me, and cared less. Where I was *an unknown unit*, of less account than the straws floating

seawards on the murky river's breast. Time and experience; the two stern foes of life. At once its teachers and its torturers.

When I looked at that strange face beside me, over which the grey shadow still hovered, I was confronted by impenetrable mystery. She crouched there wrapped in thought—contemptuous and indifferent to what had once been the code and meaning of life. Her body tortured by a fell disease; her mind a sluggish stream, burdened with a load of unfulfilled desires; her feelings deadened, even as physical activity was deadened. And yet within her, a soul fettered by Destiny; the exponent of actions it had not controlled, of sufferings it had not desired.

Oh! the weird riddle that it all was! The Riddle of the Universe, co-eval and co-eternal with that Universe itself!

\* \* \* \* \*

When again we spoke I was able to comprehend the cause of that long silence. She was as desperately in earnest over this new project as she had been over that other which held us in joint partnership.

"I want more of you, Cécile. I want to feel you are within call when weakness makes a fool of me. I have my terrors. . . . Could you give up this work for my sake. Could you live here with me? I am a lonely old woman. You know my history. You know I have loved but one human thing, and he was taken from me. You know for what I intended to use you. You foiled my purpose, and yet won my respect. The hour you struck my weapon from my hand, I hated you. Now I honour you. If my heart were not so tough and hard I could almost believe I loved you. But no matter. Love is a phrase on many foolish lips. A word of light meaning. What I feel is—is a *need*. You can supply that need. Only you. It is a selfish request, but it is my last. I have looked my fate

in the face, and I know it. I am not afraid. But when the butchers come a second time, the victim will have escaped——”

“Oh! Lady Judith,” I entreated.

She raised a shaking hand. “What I *know*,” she said, “is truth. I cannot tell how it was revealed. In the hour I knew it I vowed to claim death as the reward for—for what I have already endured to evade it. Why not? He is standing grim and inexorable on the threshold of my home. A little sooner—a little later, what does it matter. If youth, young, strong, beautiful, did not shrink from claiming, instead of awaiting Finality, why should I, hideous hag that I am, cling so desperately to the shreds and patches of bare existence. Can you tell me? No—you are silent. Best so. I have called you the only honest woman I ever met; keep the title.”

I said nothing. Bald, trite commonplaces were not for such a moment.

“Stay with me,” she went on. “You will be no sufferer for the sacrifice.”

Then hot tears stung my eyes. “That is cruel, Lady Judith! I care for you sincerely and deeply. You stand to me as the only friend I have known in this great wilderness of London. You have been my benefactress. I am more than willing to give you any comfort that is in my power. I have no great liking for this life I lead. What woman could have who possessed a shred of self-respect; who cared to hold her illusions respecting sex and purity! I would give it all up to-morrow—if you desired.”

“Will you?” she cried, eagerly. “Do you mean it?”

“I *mean* it.”

Again her head sank. The shrivelled yellow hands played nervously with the linen wrap thrown across her chair.

My eyes turned to the dying sunset; rose and gold, above those dull green pinewoods.

The peace and stillness of ending day brooded over this quiet retreat. A bird sang softly in an acacia tree. Beyond the soft and swelling lines of green, shone a silver streak. It was the sea. So lovely and so peaceful was it all that my tired heart could only be thankful for a promised continuance. I thought of those words of Owen Meredith's—

“ . . . To me there comes a sighing after ease  
 Much wanted ; and an aching wish to stand  
 Knee-deep in English grass, and have at hand  
 A little churchyard cool, with native trees  
 And grassy mounds. . . . ”

\* \* \* \* \*

Afar off I saw the church spire, guardian of such grassy mounds—pointing heavenwards, as Faith points. The Faith of that Christian Monk.

Some impulse suddenly prompted me to tell Lady Judith about him. About my visit to the Mission Hall. His preaching. Our interview.

She listened silently. Her tongue gave no caustic response, such as I had half expected. Such as, for once, I feared.

Some feelings are sanctified less by our own reverence than because they touch the sanctity of another personality. The Monk stood to me as sacred, because of his own belief and his own life sacrifices to prove its worth.

I should have hated any scoffer who threw the smallest pebble of ridicule at this God's good man.

“ Good ” in a sense that lifted life above all pettiness, all selfishness, all miserable vanity. “ Good ” in life, in principle, in action, and example. “ Good ” in that one great sense which *impresses* the ideals as well as the realities of the pure life upon life's hateful impurities. “ Good ” as few are good. For to few on earth is it given to pass into realms of selflessness. To stand—

not removed from earthly suffering—but pitiful and comprehensive of it all. Ready to comfort and to help those who need such ministration. Embodying the Great Ideal, and throning it on high for all to follow, however weak, or futile, or stumbling were their steps.

One of the strangest things in human experience is the way in which an enthusiasm fades; an idea lies fallow; and yet neither are non-existent. They but await the quickening of an emotional moment. I never realised how much I remembered of my specially emotional moment until I began to speak of it as an episode; until I saw it unfold itself like an experience that touched another personality more firmly and truly than it had touched myself.

For, as I ceased speaking, those strange, bright eyes turned with sudden, fierce longing to my face.

“What if he were right—this man? . . . What if you and I, with all our fancied cleverness, may stand as fools before the wisdom of a little child’s faith! He accepts without question. We reject what we have questioned. Yet, who is right. . . . who is to know? . . . If every action of my life has been an insult to God—have I no reason for asking, why, then, create the insulter? I never asked for life. Unknowing why or wherefore, I found it expressing what I suppose is myself. Even of *that* I am not sure. Even that no one can explain. Not even a woman like Paul’s mother. A man like your good Monk.”

And still the radiant glory of the sunset pointed to its unending mystery of continuance. Still Nature glowed and quivered about us like some vast jewel, whose glory baffled man’s paltry imitation, or any stress of time.

Had such things no meaning?

The daily miracle that meant Day’s birth and death? The mystery that claimed the change or coming of seasons? The vast chaos of space, controlled by *forces* undiscoverable? The earth-bound stars and



their strange satellites? The light that hurt, or blessed, or fiercely cursed the earth. The immensities that defied description and bred fear. The stupendous influences that ruled the Seen and the Unseen. The ever-brooding consciousness of something yet to be learnt, yet to be revealed; and the ever-persistent dropping of the curtain before that moment of Revelation?

Such thoughts rushed through my brain—perhaps through hers also. The strange woman—the woman who arraigned her own existence, and sat in judgment on its Giver!

### XXXIII

To be praised for an action that pleases oneself is a not unwelcome method of receiving commendation.

When I returned to town and informed Paul D'Eyncourt of a prospective "winding-up" and its reasons, I was both pleased and dissatisfied at his eager acceptance of my resignation, and belief in my reasons.

He had hated to think of me as the professional artificer, after whom the world of London women was trooping. Why the position should have concerned him I was unable to say. After all, it only meant disposing of the business to another beauty-factor. It was a firmly established cult. The defection of one member would have no effect on others. My own chief regret concerned the Thibauds.

All the now famous "Beaudelet specialities" meant quite a little income for myself and my old French friend.

The impossibility of serving one person without injuring another is only one more of the vexed problems of life that make the despair of philanthropists. I tried to explain it to Monsieur Thibaud as gently as I could. I saw he was no less grieved than astonished.

"Madame, with her so great business, her so fashionable connection, her prospects of so great wealth, and to give it all up for sake of attending a sick friend! And what of the so charming *ménage*, and the so excellent Barbe Piccotée? And his own Julie? She, too, would be disconsolate."

"I have arranged about Julie," I said. "She will come with me as my secretary, if you can spare her. She shall see you as often as you desire. I feel sure country

life and air will soon restore her health. That is why I am so glad she has consented. I gave her the choice of staying on with the lady who is taking over my business. But she preferred to come with me."

"That—but, of course," said the little chemist. "Where in all the world would she find such a friend as madame? How could she ever be grateful enough for all madame had done. The cure of that illness so mysterious. The happy change that had once more restored to him a daughter! But it was of a wonder unbelievable! Every day he thanked *le bon Dieu* on his so grateful knees. Every Sunday he prayed for madame at the altar of his patron saint! Madame would be blessed. Oh, that was sure! It rejoiced him to hear that the peace so tranquil was about to be her lot. The income assured. The *vie de campagne* which madame so loved and desired. And yet, perhaps, madame might one day wish to resume her so renowned business. Then, assuredly, she would find all her so valuable recipes carefully copied and locked away in his book, awaiting her pleasure."

"But you, Monsieur Thibaud! What about yourself?"

"Let not madame trouble herself as to that. I have my business still, as of before the so happy hour when I made myself of the service to madame. Not so much business as the famous Beaufelet recipes, but enough for to live, to have the comforts. After all, was not that all one should desire?"

"I'm afraid the world at large would not agree with you, Monsieur Thibaud," said I.

He returned again to the subject of Julie. "Truly it was a miracle, this that madame had wrought in that child so feeble, so distressed. She was as of the days gone before, but better. So sweet, so kind, so dutiful, and of a piety so advanced. Truly one could not thank *le bon Dieu* sufficiently, for He it must have been who put it into the heart of madame so to befriend this helpless one."

And so on; and so on.

His words, however, left an idea in my mind. I might still keep a market for my wares and benefit the good old man. He should have the honour of "Prepared only by," on every bottle and pot, and by this means he might save enough to retire upon; to realize his own dream of the cottage so small and *convenable* in the country—the country of his own beloved land. To live there and work in his garden; to have his own poultry; and his Julie to look after him! Dear old man! Surely his *bon Dieu* might have smiled favourably upon so humble an ambition.

From Monsieur Thibaud's little *pharmacie*, I returned to my modest flat. I felt some natural regret at giving it up; but more at parting with Barbe Piccotée. She had followed my fortunes so faithfully that it seemed hard to part. Yet it was equally impossible that I could take her with me to Lady Judith's.

She acknowledged that herself. Her own wish was to return to her dear Paris, where she had a married daughter and a grandchild. We arranged, however, that should anything unforeseen occur necessitating my return to this life, or leaving me independent, she should return to my service.

These matters were arranged within the fortnight following my acceptance of Lady Judith's offer. There remained only one thing more to do. That was to take a formal farewell of my fair clients. To give a "Benefit Performance" on the stage of my season's triumphs, and explain that in future they would have to put up with my successor, who had been "trained in my methods," etc., etc.

Everyone knows the humbug of such occasions.

At first I had thought of writing this explanation in the form of a circular; but then the idea seized me to give it as a lecture in the large waiting-room at Hanover Square. A lecture on the "Culture of Beauty: its Use and Abuse; its Dangers and its Absurdities."

I had long had the idea in my mind, and it cost me

little trouble to put it into shape. I mentioned it to Archey Templeton, who went into ecstasies. In fact, as the scheme developed, I made him play audience; and read and revised before him until the address threatened to become so famous as to doom me to lasting disgrace. For, as Archey took pains to explain, there is nothing a woman likes less than to hear the truth about herself; just as there is nothing so delectable as to hear the truth about her neighbours!

"My truths seem to hit both subjects," I said; at which he chuckled with delight—if, indeed, so dignified a young man could be said to "chuckle."

I had arranged to give this "*Lecture d'invitation*" on the last Saturday of my professional career.

The hour fixed was three. That would leave plenty of time to catch my train and reach Manor Heath by the evening, as usual.

Of course, only women were invited. I was surprised at the number who appeared. Every seat was occupied before I stepped on to the platform; or rather, my stage.

The lecture was to be illustrated by living models, under various processes of "repair" and beautifying. These I had secured privately. They represented a woman of fifty, another of thirty-five, and a young girl, fresh and lovely as a Hebe. Her age was seventeen.

I had spared no trouble to make the room as charming as its audience. The little stage was screened by silk curtains and banked by flowers and tall palms. A toilette table, with all my famous appliances, stood at one side. The models had to come from behind a screen; each in the order of my summons.

Their duty was to show first their natural face, then the artificial one; after which I was to remove the wrappers which covered their gowns. Then they had to sit in full evening toilette on a row of chairs facing the audience, until the conclusion of the lecture.

I had not the slightest idea what all these women expected. I stood for a moment looking at them, singling out many well-known faces. Lady Ormaroyd in the front row, beside Mrs. Dickey Johnson (an illustrated vision of Paris). Then Mrs. Dunstaine-Audley and Madame de Montserrat, and a small *coterie* representing their special friends. Other less familiar figures confronted me, curiosity expressed in their staring eyes and weary faces. Strange women, about whom I had wondered. Beautiful women, whom I had pitied for defects born of frenzied passions and hidden vices. Wildly excitable women, who talked of "goff," and "following the guns," and made bets about everything; and applied the latest slang word, "sporting," to every detail of life, whether it suited or not. Young, fashionable women, enjoying a first season as "married," and revelling in strange freedoms as a result of suitable—arrangements. All sorts and conditions of womanhood, ground down into chaff by the ruthless mill of fashionable life, were here; and all wondering what a retiring Beauty-Specialist, in a plain, black gown, had to tell them.

This is what they heard:—

"Ladies,

"In honouring me with your presence this afternoon to receive my farewell after a brief acquaintance, you have paid me the compliment of interest in my profession, and also in what I am about to tell you respecting it. Some of you have been treated by me personally, and have also been kind enough to advise your friends of my—capabilities. I desire to express my thanks for both services. Perhaps it may surprise you to hear that I took up this profession with extreme repugnance. That I have followed it out with increasing dislike, and that I now abandon it as gladly, as I am sure you would abandon its aids, were Nature as kind to you as Fate has been to me. I mean in freeing us from—obligations.

"Before parting from you all, however, I am anxious to say a few words on the all important subject of Beauty.

"Beauty, that one-desired and desirable thing, for which our sex have sacrificed so much, by which they have gained so much—and, alas! truth compels me to say—*lost* so much. In itself personal loveliness is a great gift. But it has innumerable drawbacks and innumerable temptations. A really beautiful woman is a prominent object. She is a target for men's passions, and for women's envy. Yet, after all, is her lot so enviable? She has scores of lovers, let us say, but she can only love one—at a time. She can only marry one of her suitors, also—at a time. Her very charms keep her in perpetual anxiety. *How* she looks on all and every occasion, is the main point of her existence. Jealousy and rivalry are her constant attendants. Of friends, she can rarely be sure. Of enemies, always. So beauty, however envied, is rarely enviable. Yet, despite this fact, women crave its possession above and beyond all others. Nay, more than this, they waste untold hours and labour in producing its semblance, that 'counterfeit presentment,' which, at best, is unsatisfactory; which deceives no one, not even themselves. For, alas! the hateful obligation of 'putting on' is attended by the still more hateful process of 'taking off.' We are all women here; and as no carping man can amuse himself at our expense, I feel certain you will pardon a few plain truths, and a few practical hints. First of all, I will give you an illustration of the art of making-up, and show you its effects in the person of a living model. The age represented is fifty. This lady has kindly consented to permit my experiments in order to prove what Art can do for Age."

I touched a bell; my first model walked on. Drab-haired, wrinkled, weird. She took the seat before the mirror.

In five minutes I turned the chair round, and she faced the crowd; her skin creamed and powdered; her cheeks softly tinted; her lips red; her brows and lashes delicately curved and pencilled; the old head and dead-coloured hair framed a comparatively youthful face. I then took up

## Queer Lady Judas

a "transformation," and placed it over the natural hair. It was a lovely-shaded grey, beautifully waved, and it toned down the lines and contour of the face beneath as mere dyed locks of more youthful tints could never have done. I then removed the wrappers, and my lady of Autumn appeared in a soft, grey evening gown, with a few jewels about her throat. As she stood up under the rose-shaded lights and faced the audience, there was a murmur of applause.

Then the model walked across the stage, and seated herself in one of the chairs at the back.

"You see, ladies," I went on, "the power of Art. How it can imitate the semblance and colouring of youth. But you also see in what Art is powerless. The hair has no lustre or luxuriance. The eyes have lost their brilliancy. The contour of the face is changed. The lines of throat and neck are haggard. The brow is wrinkled. There are small, self-betraying creases round the mouth. The art of the dentist is responsible for the once brilliant pearls disclosed by laughter or by speech. There are heavy marks beneath the eyes, and lines at the corners. These are the natural effects of Time and hard living. Living as women live now. In excitement; in pleasure. In a perpetual rush and tear from week's end to week's end. In too strenuous exertion, or too little. In too great excesses of appetite, or too ascetic a belief in figure preservation. In the hundred and one foolish offences against the natural laws of life and hygiene, which result in ageing and disfiguring Nature's beautiful workmanship. You all know faces like the one I have just restored. And you all know also that it is only—*restoring*. A temporary illusion, even if a pleasant one. Yet for that illusion you are kind enough to make the fame and fortunes of my profession!

"I will now show you another model. One which will appeal more nearly in point of age to your sympathies."

Again I touched the bell. The second model advanced.



I had carefully selected her on the lines of Mrs. Dickey Johnson, and women of her colouring and age. She possessed a wealth of chestnut hair, a good figure, but an exceedingly bad complexion.

"I wish now to illustrate a phase of life which many woman are happy enough to evade. That ~~just-mid-life~~, between thirty and forty, when they first realize that youth has vanished, and that their charms are on the wane. Some good points remain. Time deals gently with certain types of womanhood—notably the chestnut or auburn-haired type, so peculiarly English, and so prodigally favoured with exquisite skin and exquisite colouring. Were the owners of such skins and colouring only gifted with common sense, and a little useful hygienic knowledge, they might preserve such charms indefinitely. Unfortunately, few girls are taught how to wash their faces or take care of their skins. Bad habits cling to one. The most perfect skin won't stand rough towels rubbing it the *wrong* way; for there is a wrong way of drying your faces, even as there is wrong soap and unsuitable water for laving them. This second model has ruined a good skin by such methods. Choked pores, and the use of bad soaps, and the wretched messes sold by chemists as "soothing or emollient," have produced the effects you now see. A long course of treatment would be necessary to repair the harm done. But remember that *no* treatment and *no* remedy, however advertised, can do for you what Nature has done. It is impossible. I could steam and cleanse these choked pores so that they once more resumed normal activity, but neither I nor any other beauty specialist can ever make it look as it used to look. Of course, it would be my duty to pretend I could. To assure any client that it was a mere question of time and treatments; but all the time I should be deceiving you. On the other hand, there is groundwork for art of an effective kind. I will show you what I mean."

In five minutes the auburn-haired model faced them. Exquisitely tinted--her beautiful hair artfully shadowing brow and cheek. Her white neck and shoulders gleaming like ivory. A dress of pale turquoise-blue floated softly around her graceful figure. Save that the face was Art instead of Nature, the model might have stood for Mrs. Dickey Johnson herself. And, when I saw Mrs. Audley whispering and nodding excitedly to Julie de Montserrat, I knew perfectly well what she was saying.

No. II floated over the crimson-carpeted stage, and sank back into a chair beside model No. I.

The faces of the audience had now lost their look of boredom. Some were musing; some showed decided surprise; and some as decided annoyance. Probably they had not reckoned upon so frank a "giving away" of their qualities and attendant defects.

I now summoned my last model. The girl of seventeen.

I did not ask her to sit before the toilette table. There was no need.

The host of curious eyes looked only at a young, slim form, in a soft Grecian dress of ivory crepe. The tints of the face were fresh as apple-blossoms, and as delicately lovely. The loosely-knotted hair had a sheen and lustre and luxuriance that shamed the arts of the professional *coiffeur*. The grace and lovely lines of the young figure were shown in all their supple beauty through the soft transparency of her loose robe. The eyes that gazed half-abashed at that sea of curious faces were darkly-blue as sapphires, and fringed with lashes curved and feathery--in themselves a beauty, even had the eyes been less clear and luminous. Those exquisite eyes of youth--unknowing evil, and unvisited by sorrow. The eyes that only youth and childhood know. The eyes that never lotion or wash, or any trick of artifice can simulate for a single moment!

She stood there. A girl with Nature's goodly gifts of

youth and beauty. With all that these women coveted ; with all that they never could regain.

And they knew it. Into each heart the lesson sank. Hateful as all truth is hateful. Bitter as all disappointments are bitter.

In that slight form and smooth brow, and in those clear bright eyes, the ghosts of their dead youth, dead sinlessness, dead purity, faced them. Words were not needed.

The girl turned and moved slowly along, and took her seat beside the other figures. They sat motionless on that crimson stage. Artifice and artlessness. Art and Nature. And gazing at them as dreamers gaze, sat all that meretricious, artificial crowd.

I—who ruled both in that moment, came forward to speak my parting words.

#### XXXIV

It was not the first time in my life that I had held unwilling attention by sheer force of will.

I knew how restive, and uncomfortable, and *désillusionnée* was that crowd of fashion and beauty and meretricity. How chagrined at an experience which differed so widely from their expectations. But this was my opportunity, and I had determined to profit by it.

I stood a little on one side so that the three models were well in view; and I summed up the lesson I wished to teach in sight of them and their prototypes.

“Ladies—I have endeavoured to show you the varying stages by which we descend from Nature to Art. But the lesson is without point if it has not proved how immeasurably superior is Nature’s workmanship. For Beauty holds one priceless and inimitable secret, and that secret is—Youth! That youth is crude, short-lived, imperfect, save just for its own young perfection, we all know—to our cost. It is a jewel we accept with careless hands; counting nothing of its value until it is lost, or stolen. Then we try to console ourselves with its imitation. But, beautiful as are the Parisian gems in the shop windows, they grow lustreless before the flashing glory of the real diamond they simulate. So with artificial loveliness. It has a charm; but it is the charm of artifice. It deceives no one; and when beside it shines out the lustre of the real jewel, it knows only envy and regret.

But do not imagine I am disparaging the imitation. Even in good society women wear the *diamants de Paris*, and the

prestige of their own rank invests the spurious article with a value none dare dispute. In like manner, a woman once renowned for personal beauty, owes it to herself (or thinks she does) to keep up that reputation at any cost. Therefore she has recourse to art. And if the art were good and well done, no one would blame her. But unfortunately, art has its penalties. It is costly; it is invidious; and it engenders a habit, that in course of time becomes our master instead of our slave. It is so easy to begin, so hard to leave off; and as self consciousness vanishes, so does self-knowledge. Knowledge of our own absurdity. Once we take to looking young we cease to remember that there is also a stage of existence when Nature insists upon our looking old. The effort to bridge that difficult space between thirty and fifty is comparatively forgiveable. But the effort to pretend fifty is thirty is a perceptible fraud. At best, it is only a travesty; one denied by our figures, our hair, our colouring, above all by our eyes. They are the tell-tale exponents of Nature. Paint, and powder, and enamel as we may, a tired, dulled, faded eye betrays us unsparingly. Its hue, its heavy lid, its outer folds, its lines, its expression, these are things that cannot lie. They speak more eloquently than the grey hairs we dye, or the increasing burden of flesh we—anti-fatten!

“Take us all in all as women, we have little cause to bless Nature. She has dowered us with a career so short that regrets come almost on its zenith. We only learn the value of our looks as we recognize they are bidding us an eternal farewell. The thousand accidents of climate, environment, health, wifehood, maternity, disappointment, unhappiness—these lie in wait for us at the very portals of womanhood. They rob the bloom of youth, the joy of the heart, the thrill of the senses. Scarcely do we know life and love and pleasure, than they are gone. Their treasures stolen from our listless, or snatched from our

reluctant hands ; stolen and snatched, to be laid at the feet of fairer rivals, who, in their turn, are despoiled and left despairing. I blame no woman who tries to hold these treasures, so long as she esteems them treasures. But, in reality, they are poor enough things, could we only dip into the philosophy of life. Could we accept mental gifts and mental resources as a compensation for youth and physical allurements.

"There are charms as attractive and more lasting than that of Beauty. The charm of culture ; the charm of manner ; the charm of a gracious and gifted personality. These impress the mind and linger in the memory. They are things that set a woman apart from sensual frivolity, and give her a prestige that no mere beauty can boast. Also they are the donors of a special gift ; something independent of an east wind, or a motor accident, or an illness, or even our dreaded bugbear—Age. This may seem a queer sort of lecture for a beauty specialist to deliver. It may differ widely from what you have expected to hear. But I plead excuse that I took up the rôle or profession, or whatever you like to call it, from dire necessity ; and, after eight months' experience, I am giving it up of my own free will ; just when, as a matter of livelihood, I could count my years' gains by thousands ! This is no exaggeration. The fate that befel me is one that might befall any of yourselves. Loss of fortune, and its attendant loss of social distinction. I sank my identity as I sank my name. Though I could claim equality with anyone here, I chose that they should know me simply as—the woman you have known. The woman who has massaged, and beautified, and advised you all ; and who now, with a clear conscience, bids you—farewell.

"I have frankly confessed to you that when you looked your best you owed it to art. What remedies or specifics I have sold have at least had the qualification of perfect harmlessness. I have played female Æsculapius to you, and advised a rational mode of living ; fresh air, simple food, exercise, and

the avoidance of stimulants and nicotine. You did not like the advice any more than you like the pill or draught your physician prescribes ; but such of you as wish to preserve beauty and youth must make personal sacrifices to do so—or else resort to art. There is no other way. Nature is a harsh task-mistress. Her rules are fixed, and cannot be evaded without penalty. It is no use pretending otherwise. There are many women of fifty, I grant, who look ten years off that age. But they have been wise enough to follow such simple rules of hygiene as I have prescribed. Also they know how to keep in touch with the progress of life's seasons. For each has a beauty and a charm of its own; and to suit the season is more sensible than to deny it is there to suit. In the autumn of life as in the autumn of the year, mellow-tints, subdued colours, and submission to natural laws—as applied to one's hair, one's figure or complexion—will do much to afford a dignified personality. Believe me, men are not deceived by the arts to which women resort. The mother may look as young as the daughter, until the daughter—representative of youth, not imitating it—appears on the scene. Then—the imitation is self-advertised."

I pointed to the three figures on my little stage.

"You were impressed by No. I. You had a kindred interest in No. II. Before No. III you sat motionless and silent. I have given you a living illustration of what life means for women to whom personal attractions are all-important. I have kept a sadder and darker picture in the background. As the curtain descends on my stage, and, as I pass from your sight, so will the curtain of disillusion fall one day over that picture for each and all of us. We see its dim shadow as we remove the artifice of art. We look into our soul's eyes through the mirror of our own.

"What we read is our own secret—unguessed—unknown of any other mortal. The secret of our lives—and their results!"

I bowed. The curtain descended.

With one impulse they rose, that crowd of women, and went silently away. There was no applause, no thanks, no leave-taking. Only—silence.

\* \* \*

"So they did not murder you?" questioned Archey Templeton, as he met me at the station an hour later. Julie Thibaud was already there; so were our trunks, and Barbe Piccotée, and Monsieur Thibaud, pleasantly excited, as was my faithful old servitor.

I laughed at the query. "No. They went away in perfect, stunned silence. Not a word, or sign."

"How crushing! I at least hoped someone would be brave enough to turn and rend you for your heresies. They were unforgiveable by such an audience."

I drew a long, deep breath. "Thank heaven, I have done with it all! With them, and their lives, and their insincerity and folly! It is only when one is face to face with Nature that one fully realizes the absurdities of the World."

"Do I rank as one?" he asked.

"Indeed you do," I said. "But you are a very pleasant one."

"For these, much thanks," as Shakes—I mean Bacon, hath it. Will you kindly tell Lady Judith that I am dying to see her again. Also that I cannot readily forgive her for taking you away in this summary manner. Also that I intend shortly to pay her a visit, even if she refuses to see me."

"Is that all?" I said, as I took my seat.

"Not by a long way. Do you know our mutual friend is coming down by this train also. He'll miss it if he's not quick."

"What? Paul D'Eyncourt?"

"Yes. Lady Judith wired for him. Oh! here he is. Talk of the—— Ah, my dear fellow! I was just explaining



to Madame de Marsac that I had met you this afternoon. Are you getting into a smoker, or here? Oh! I always forget you don't smoke. Is there room, Madame de Marsac?"

"Plenty," I said.

He moved away from the carriage door. Paul D'Eyncourt stood there. A porter held his bag.

"May I enter?" he said.

"Of course." I drew back from the door.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't let you know," he said. "But I only had the wire after you had gone to Hanover Square."

"Nothing wrong, I hope," I said, anxiously.

"Oh, no. Simply telling me to come down till Monday."

"The luck falls always to the undeserving," murmured Archey Templeton. "Here am I roasting in editorial dens, writing leaderettes in my shirt sleeves, pining for a breath of country air, and not a soul to suggest week ends—innocent or otherwise. . . . Great Scott! By all that's unholy—I do believe——"

He moved away; stepped back on the platform, and gazed at the crowd. Men rushing along and looking anxiously into carriages. Fussy women. Worried maids clinging to bags and jewel cases. Stately footmen, refusing to be hurried. Ticket collectors opening and shutting doors. Energetic porters whirling late luggage into the van. I wondered at what he was staring so intently. Paul had put his bag up on the rack, and was finding places for sticks and umbrellas.

I leant out of the window. "What is it," I asked, curiously.

"You are travelling in illustrious company. A carriage-load of distinguished 'week-enders' are just behind. I recognized the Marquis of Stoot. He has a place in Dorsetshire, I know. I'm not sure that it's a hundred miles removed from Lady Judith's. Do you know the

amiable gentleman—by repute? I won't suggest personal acquaintance."

"I have never heard of him."

"Well, his bad deeds *do* shine, not like a candle, but a bonfire, in this naughty world—a roaring, crackling bonfire—even though he is a septenagenarian. But let this pass. My astonishment was not called up by his appearance, but by that of his companions—or rather *one* of his companions. Who do you think?"

"I couldn't guess. If it's a case of 'show me a man's friends,' etc., etc."

"We are quite in the quotation line! What is it? Oh! tickets—I'm not going. Paul, this is your business."

"Well," I said, leaning forward as the collector passed on. "Am I to be enlightened? Who is the companion?"

"The Countess of Ripley," he said.

## XXXV

I FOUND various new arrangements at Manor Heath.

Lady Judith had had a bedroom made up for herself on the ground floor, so that she could be wheeled on to the terrace without difficulty. She had apportioned a suite of rooms to me upstairs. A bedroom, dressing, and sitting room. Julie was on the same floor.

I was charmed with my surroundings. They faced south, and looked over wood and heath to where the sea gleamed; the harbour of Prayle and the channel beyond. A belt of high hills closed the horizon line, but all between lay dense pine forests and miniature valleys. After the confined spaces and hot close streets of London, this expanse of wide sky and green distance seemed heavenly. I stood for long at my window, drinking in the beauty and the peace. Twilight still lingered in the sky. A quivering, luminous green, melting into hazy gold.

The scents of the garden floated softly on air as sweet and peaceful as themselves—the peace born of stillness, and loneliness, and perfume. It sank into my heart through those outer senses of recognition that are sometimes so keenly alive, and sometimes so perversely closed.

To-night mine were keenly alive to external things. I seemed to have left worry and anxiety behind me. Whatever obligations attended my position here, they could never be so hateful as those I had abandoned. To the future I gave no thought. There seemed no need to do so. Storm and stress had been mine for long enough. Now I had drifted into a haven of rest; that was sufficient.

## Queer Lady Judas

The sound of a gong summoned me downstairs. Supper was prepared for Paul and Julie and myself. Lady Judith had retired for the night, the nurse informed me. But she wished to see me when the meal was over.

Paul was not such a lively companion as Archey Templeton. He seemed singularly *distracted* and absorbed. Julie, however, was in excellent spirits, and had thrown aside much of her old shyness and reserve. She chattered volubly of the delights of the country, and the wild beauty of our surroundings; of a passionate desire to learn the bicycle, so as to be able to ride for miles and miles through all the surrounding district.

"You know it well, I suppose?" I asked Paul D'Eyncourt.

"Oh, yes. I have often stayed here."

"Where is Lord Stroat's place. Anywhere near?"

"It lies about three miles west. Brinksea Hall. It's a big, ugly place. He seldom goes there."

"Is the old Marquis rich?" I asked.

"He used to be. But he has contrived to spend a great deal more than his income warrants."

"With the usual results for the heir?" I said.

"There is no direct heir. The Marquis never married."

I changed the subject.

"Have you seen Lady Judith?"

"She sent a message that she did not feel well enough. She would see me to-morrow morning."

"I am afraid," I said, "you will find her greatly altered."

"I am sure of it. But I think—I mean, you may trust me not to betray myself."

"I wish your mother were here!" I said, suddenly.

"Then I should feel quite happy."

"I am sure she would enjoy it," he said, glancing out through the wide-opened windows to the dewy peace and loveliness of the gardens. "But Lady Judith has expressed no desire to see her."

"She doesn't care to see anyone," I said. "She has a sort of morbid horror of people now!"

"Except yourself."

"I was with her during the ordeal. That makes all the difference."

"She is sincerely fond of you, Madame de Marsac. Even that difference you once had, could not uproot her affections. She suffered greatly during that estrangement, I know it."

"Yet it could have been ended by a word."

"Perhaps she did not think so. She is a woman who has always had her own way. A woman who resents opposition. For once she had to accept it."

"Do you know," I said, in lowered tones, "that she has never mentioned the Countess's name since. I thought it so extraordinary that she should have come into this dreary neighbourhood—now. It seems something more than coincidence."

"Are you trying to bring your fatalistic faculties to bear upon a perfectly natural occurrence?" he asked, smiling.

"Not *trying*. The occurrence fits in with my theory."

"Let us hope not. I have a singular dislike to that woman. Like a stormy petrel, she always seems to prophesy disaster in some shape."

I rose from the table. "I must leave you and Julie to entertain each other. I am going to Lady Judith."

\* \* \* \* \*

She was in bed, propped up by pillows. She had insisted on having her "transformations" again, and looked less haggard and witch-like; but she was very feeble still. Her strength was slow of return.

"Ah, my dear! How glad I am!" She pressed my hand. We never kissed one another.

"Sit there," she went on, "and tell me about the 'wind-up.' And your lecture—how did it go off?"

I gave her extracts. She chuckled, hoarsely. "Good! good! They will hate you, though."

"I can survive it," I said. "If I had played up to their vanity—if I had done even more for them than I have done, I don't believe one of those women would have lent me a sovereign to keep me from starving!"

"Of course not. They would have recommended you to the poor-house, or got up a bazaar and kept half the profits to pay their 'out-of-pocket' expenses! Oh, I know them!"

She nodded viciously. "Well, well, that's a turned-down leaf. Let's get on to the new chapter. Do you like your rooms?"

"They are charming."

"That's right. I want you to be happy. I want you to enjoy your life as freely as if this were your own home. You can ask friends down from Saturday to Monday. You must order horses or conveyances when you please; they are idling in the stables. Perhaps now and then we may have drives together. The doctor promised me that on his last visit. He seemed to think I was really better."

"I'm delighted," I said, eagerly.

"I do believe you mean that!" she said, looking at me with suddenly dimmed eyes. "It's good to hear one human creature say it. I've known hatred, and hypocrisy, and deception, and ingratitude. I haven't known much love."

"This is a splendid arrangement, having your room downstairs," I went on, hurriedly. "There's no shaking or jerking to get you on to the terrace. I should think it would be quite easy to place you in a carriage."

"Yes. There's to be some special thing; a folding couch that fits on the seat. It has been ordered. You see, I had made up my mind you should find your duties out out for you."

"Duties!" I scoffed. "I wish you'd give me something really hard and unpleasant to do."

"It's wonderful how well we've always got on, you and I," she said, thoughtfully.

"You have been very good to me, Lady Judith."

"Nonsense, child. It was about time I thought of someone besides myself. . . . Do you know, Cécile, I haven't any near relative. No one, save those old maids you met—the Tallifers. And they're rich enough. I can leave my money where I please. There's such a pile of it! I've often thought I'd leave one half to Paul, and the other to—a hospital."

"Why not?" I said. "Paul would be a wise steward, I'm sure."

"He has been a good son," she went on. "And has served me faithfully. He has comforted me for my dead boy's loss oftener than I could say. Yes—— I shall leave him one half. But the other——"

She paused, and took my hand as it lay on the coverlet.

"The other—— shall not go to the hospital *now*, my dear, adopted daughter."

I felt my face flame to the temples. "Lady Judith! Oh, please—*please*——"

"Hush!" she said, peremptorily. "Don't cross my will a second time. I don't know how I ever forgave you. But, having forgiven—— I put the whole thing out of mind."

She closed her eyes, and lay back against the pillows.

"We will never speak of it again, Cécile. I am happy in knowing you saved me from a crime. It would have been that, I suppose. But I am happier in our reconciliation. In knowing I have still your hand to cling to. Your honest liking for a hateful and hated old woman!"

The tears sprang to my eyes. I lifted that frail, wrinkled hand to my lips. I could find no words. In moments of emotion silence is the truest eloquence.

We sat there, our hands clasped, the soft dusk enfolding us. It was a moment tense with feeling. It was a moment that sent me groping and stumbling to the gates of prayer.

To voiceless acknowledgment of beneficent Goodness. For at last life showed me both Purpose and Fulfilment. Not mere chance good or ill.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nurse was sitting by the open window. Beyond it I saw the garden steeped in moonlight. The sound of voices reached me. Paul's voice, and Julie's.

Lady Judith stirred suddenly on her pillows. "I hear Paul. Whose is the other voice—the morphia girl's."

"Oh, don't call her that again. It brings back all that hateful time."

"I wonder what possessed you——"

"One ought to try and do some good before one lays down the burden of life. This seemed such a positive duty."

"I will see her—not to-night, some other time; and then—Paul. I sent for him, and yet haven't courage for the interview. I shall never go back to Eaton Square, Cécile, but I wanted to arrange——"

Her voice broke.

I rose hurriedly. "Dear, you are tired. It is getting late. I am sure you ought not to talk any more."

"Well, good-night," she said, in the old abrupt way. "Remember, you are as much mistress here as myself. Do just what you please. The servants have had my orders. I—I want you to be happy. You—and Paul. The only two human creatures who have broken the ice of my frozen old heart."

The nurse came forward. "You must not talk too much, my lady, or you won't sleep."

"I shall sleep long enough and sound enough soon," she said. "Let me talk while I have the chance."

She made an impatient gesture, and the woman went back to her seat.

"The ice is broken safe enough," went on Lady Judith; "thawed effectually. I am going to try to be happy for



a little space; have my own way again. Ah, Cécile! why hadn't I a daughter like you. I should have led such a different life—such a different life."

"These things are part of the Eternal Question," I said, sadly. "We come into Life asking why? We go out of it with that question still unanswered."

"As I shall"—she said, very low; "as I shall."

I made no answer. Of theories and perplexities and surmise I had grown weary. I, too, wanted that question satisfied. I, too, listened vainly for response. From whom would it come—from Without, from Within, from Beyond? From stentorian throats of glorified Hosts, or from one still, small voice?

Seeing that she lay quiet and motionless on the pillows, I thought she had fallen asleep.

After a few moments' silence I rose softly and went over to the window. The nurse looked up. She was one of the two who had been in attendance during the operation.

"There is really an improvement at last," I said, very softly.

"Yes, a great difference."

Her tone was ambiguous. I watched her face as she resumed her work.

"Less restless, is she not?"

"Morphia," she said, under her breath. "The doctor gives it every day."

I started.

"But is that necessary?"

She nodded. "He thinks it was not successful—that operation; they could not keep her long enough under the chloroform."

"Good gracious!——"

"Hush," she whispered, warningly, with a glance at the bed. "We must not let her know, poor soul."

I stepped through the window on to the terrace, and stood there sick and trembling, while all the enfolding

peace of the night seemed to stoop towards me with extended arms. That life should be so hateful and plague-stricken, and Nature so divinely beautiful!

I walked on, and descended some steps, and crossed a space of lawn smooth as velvet. I found a path leading through a belt of shrubbery and gradually ascending till it reached a little knoll, upon which was perched a rustic summer-house. The full moon shone down, clear and luminous; it lit up the vast depths of pine-woods, the rugged heath and moor, the far-off silver sea. It showed me a new portion of the country and a new landscape. Afar off, too, I saw the square ugly towers of Brinksea Hall. It was the first time I had been to this portion of the grounds. Usually I had spent most of my hours with Lady Judith, or in the lower gardens.

"It is well she does not know her enemy is so near at hand," I thought, as I saw the gleaming lights in the distance. "I hope she never may know it."

I sat on a wooden bench just within the doorway, and gave myself up to meditation and conjectures. I passed in review all the strange happenings of these past months. It seemed odd that, of all the new friends I had made and the people I had met, only this one queer old woman had in any way appealed to me—appealed in the sense of interest and affection. It might have been because she was a difficult woman to get on with—and yet we had got on—or that because, with all her riches, her position in the world, I had recognized her utter loneliness—the heart-loneliness that was my own portion.

It seemed as if some secret and violent understanding had drawn us together. As if we had been mutually testing each other's strength. Now we were to be together through a yet more terrible ordeal, and I was facing it in imagination. Trying to picture "finality" for that restless, dominating spirit.

I could not picture it as non-existent. As a quenched

fire ; a spent force. With other people it had been quite possible ; not with Lady Judith.

The peace and calm of the night were suddenly spoilt for me. With or without my will, I found myself once more confronted with that compassionate face of the Monk. I seemed to feel his hands holding mine ; his voice bidding me pray with him. And then, suddenly, my own voice broke the stillness about me, and beat like a fierce wave against long-closed doors of obstinate unbelief.

"*If I could pray !*" That was what I heard. "*If I only—only could !*"

I looked up, and saw the stars. I thought—if Heaven were something more than just their abiding place ? If it were God's home, and the home of souls redeemed and saved, as that good man had said souls *were* saved !

It was a thought that sent the blood from my heart to my face. It was a thought that rent doubt asunder, and tore to shreds a hundred pitiful subterfuges.

All that radiant, glorious space a Home—not mere emptiness. All earth's defilement a cast-off garment ; and there, in the New Life, and the New World purity and "peace that passeth understanding !" Oh ! if I could but *know*. If only I might have a sign to convince me !

I was on my knees now with arms upraised, and yet only half conscious why I should be in this lonely place, uttering such strange words.

I was thrilled with a sudden sense of responsibility. Of some task given me to do. And yet the ruling spirit of denial was strong enough to battle against an emotional phase. Such a phase as I had already experienced in the crowded Mission Hall. I had conquered it then. Why not again. Why not—now ?

I had lost all count of time. Suddenly I rose and passed swiftly into the twilight gloom of the pines ; and, finding a path, went on and on, unconscious of where my heedless steps were taking me. The path widened abruptly. I

found myself in the avenue—but going away from the house instead of to it. I paused, and tried to collect my scattered senses. I asked myself what had possessed me to rush in this blindfold manner from that little hut to where I now found myself? With an effort I sought control. My heart was beating violently. My white gown was torn by the brushwood and wet with dew. My hair clung damply to my brow. I had a strange, horrible feeling of not being myself at all. Not the calm, controlled Cécile de Marsac I knew; but a tempestuous, terrified creature, a thing of rage, and fear, and agony, and doubt, who looked upon that other Cécile as a stranger; who pushed her aside into some vague shadowy darkness, and reached up and beyond to a new light that she recognized.

Light. . . . That was what I desired.

That was what I had prayed for—if, indeed that strange obsession on the hill-top could be called prayer. That sudden impulse of beseeching, that casting aside the trammels of earthly vanities and desires, and clamouring, somewhere, for sign of truth. Truth that might illuminate. Truth that should make all clear. Truth that should answer once for all that gnawing, craving hunger—to *know*.

\* \* \* \* \*

About me the tall trees stood in serried rows, and crystal clear above them sailed the moon. Beyond stretched the road, that narrow uneven road which Paul had called “no man’s land.”

As I stood half dazed looking towards it, the stillness of the night was broken by a loud, discordant hoot—the hideous, familiar hoot of a motor horn.

I wondered why such a vehicle should be rushing along in this direction. The driver must have mistaken his way. With that thought came the memory of an awkward turn; of twisted roots and tree trunks.

But the fiery glare of two flashing eyes startled me into

fear for my own safety. I sprang back from the road.

Even as I did so the whole space around became a nightmare of horrors! The car, tearing along at reckless speed, was suddenly caught and overturned. Pandemonium let loose could scarce have rivalled that scene of confusion; of human shrieks; the groans of tortured bodies; the throbs of protesting machinery, that splintered the night's sweet silence into a million discordant echoes.

And, then, as I rushed forward—the sickening sight of still figures; shattered limbs! Death and torture, and shocked humanity struggling into the light of the glaring lamps; and, over all, the serene and soulless moon.

I heard a voice shouting from some far distance. I saw a figure rushing towards the scene of the accident. Then another body twisted and turned itself, and struggled up to its feet.

“Good God!” cried a man’s voice. “Where is she?  
. . . Oh, look! look!”

I did look. At a shapeless mass. A woman’s figure, crushed and mangled beneath the wheels of the overturned car. Sudden calmness and self-command came to me. I lent my aid. Other figures rose or struggled from the débris, or sank back in pitiful helplessness.

Then I heard Paul D'Eyncourt's voice, and knew whose figure I had seen rushing towards us. Between us we drew a crushed form from out the destroying monster, that ironized the potent force of Science with the fiat of an inevitable doom.

I looked at a face—ivory white beneath its motor cap. At lovely, chiselled features—unharméd and beautiful as ever.

It was the face that had claimed my art and defied my cautions. The face I had last seen in my own rooms; the face on which Death's seal had stamped the finality of Beauty.

The Countess of Ripley and I had met for the last time—without appointment.

## XXXVI

MANOR HEATH was both mortuary and hospital for that awful night. It was a scene of horrors, from which Lady Judith, sleeping her drugged sleep, was mercifully excluded.

The chauffeur had a terrible tale to tell. A tale of reckless, half-inebriated spirits, bent on a motor-drive by moonlight. Of dare-devil speed; of disregarded warnings, ending in this fatality. The old Marquis of Stoot was dead. So was Lady Ripley. Another woman of the party had one of her legs broken. One other man was unconscious still from concussion. A girl—a budding society actress who had been of the party, was terribly disfigured. Another man had escaped with a few bruises, and by his aid, and Paul's, the bodies had been conveyed to the house. We despatched a messenger and dog-cart for the doctor. He did what he could for the wounded and maimed sufferers. The dead Countess was carried upstairs and laid on the bed that had been Lady Judith's. The bed from which she had risen to take my arm, and walk to the operating table.

Surely, Fate's grim irony had never worked in better vein; had never achieved a greater triumph!

\* \* \* \* \*

With the sound of Sabbath bells pealing and swelling on the golden morning air, I went into Lady Judith's room, and told her of the accident.

The shock seemed to galvanize her into sudden life and strength. She sprang up in the bed.

"Take me to her," she clamoured. "Take me at once. . . . Let me see for myself!"

We wrapped her in a loose satin gown, and then her chair was carried up the stairs and wheeled into that death-chamber. She dismissed everyone except myself.

She sat there and gazed on the sheeted figure, as if incredulous that what *had* happened could have happened. Passive I waited by her side.

She made a sign at last. I drew the linen sheet from that beautiful face; marble pale and cold, yet exquisite even in death.

Those merciless eyes of the woman she had wronged gazed on and on, as if they never could be satisfied with gazing. Of what she thought or felt she gave no sign; only sat there, bending towards the beautiful, lifeless creature, whose womanhood had been despoiled and defiled by countless infamies—yet to whom even Death had been kind.

At long last Lady Judith turned her eyes away. She looked at me.

"Do you remember . . . what you said that night, when you refused to do what I asked? Do you remember how I laughed? . . . Say it again, Cécile. I shall not laugh now."

I started. The warm blood tingled in my veins, and all my heart seemed to melt and glow as if fused in a furnace of fire.

Surely there were voices in the air; in my deafened ears. Surely someone cried aloud, "You prayed for a sign. Behold—it is given."

Trembling, as one in great awe, I repeated those words—wrung from me once by impulse, taught to me now by Faith.

"'Vengeance is mine. I—will repay,' saith the Lord!"

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